A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ORAL PROFICIENCY OF CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: A DISCOURSE MARKER PERSPECTIVE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

LIST OF TABLES

Table Page

Table Page

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Discourse markers (DMs) have been increasingly recognized as an integral part of coherent discourse in context, which contribute to the comprehension and co-construction of the communicative process. It has been solidly established that they function in the metalinguistic domain beyond the description of traditional semantic and syntactic approaches. Research has provided a great deal of theoretical and practical support that these expressions function beyond propositional content and have an important effect on how discourse proceeds by integrating discourse units or pointing to social involvement in verbal communication.

Although no consensus has been reached as to what should be considered discourse markers and in what ways they function as coherence builders, their salient function in discourse organization has triggered vast research interests in the way they affect verbal interaction. Most work views discourse markers as devices that either move the discourse forward smoothly by helping people understand the interrelatedness of various discourse units, or index social and interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, the majority of existing research studied individual DMs, rather than treating DMs as a well-defined category functioning at both ideational and interactional levels.

A major strand in discourse marker research is the way discourse markers affect oral communication. Discourse markers have been shown to improve people's understanding of a conversation as a coherent whole. In addition to a discourse structuring function, they are also useful conversational devices that ensure that language is used in socially and situationally appropriate ways. In particular, some linguistic expressions have been found typically associated with spoken interaction. They facilitate the natural development of the interaction and assist people in managing and understanding the conversation flow.

Because of their importance in verbal communication, discourse markers constitute an intrinsic part of one's communicative competence. Various aspects of communicative competence may involve the use of discourse markers which are closely associated with communicative effectiveness. Therefore, it is necessary to use a model that embodies both the textual and interpersonal domains of discourse marker use in spoken discourse because it reflects the ability of participants to tie their discourse not only to the linguistic environment but also to the interactional context.

The fact that use of discourse markers is an intrinsic part of communicative competence sparked a concern about their relevance to second and foreign language learning. Much of existing research compared the use of discourse markers of nonnative speakers to that of native speakers with the starting point that native speakers serve as a point of reference for learners. Such research provides valuable pedagogical insights, which evaluate learners' language capability in terms of how close discourse marker use is to native speakers. Nevertheless, little empirical evidence is known as to whether discourse markers are a linguistic parameter that distinguishes different levels of

speaking performance, although existing evidence leads to the assumption that effective use of discourse markers positively relates to oral proficiency ratings. Furthermore, there is hardly any work on how various speaking tasks and contexts can affect learners' discourse marker performance. Such information may be useful in the effort to improve learners' discourse management skills. Since it is believed that the presence and use of discourse markers may be part of the reason why some texts are more successful than others and why some participants appear more communicatively competent than others, the features identified with more advanced speakers can be encouraged in the classroom for learners to develop their competence in spoken interaction.

Another area in existing research that is relatively underexplored is the use of DMs in the Chinese context. This context is of particular interest because it has the largest population learning English as a foreign language. The teaching and learning of English in China has been largely exam-oriented and used to neglect speaking and listening. With a growing emphasis on communicative competence in English education in the past decade, the importance of speaking and listening have been increasingly recognized; as a result, speaking has been included as an integral component of more and more exams. A washback effect of this is that English oral proficiency has been drawing unprecedented attention from teachers and learners alike. Nevertheless, the reality is that at present a large proportion of college-level learners are not able to achieve the oral proficiency desirable for effective communication, which frustrates both teachers and learners. In light of the functions of discourse markers in spoken interaction, detailed and comprehensive descriptions and analyses of discourse markers from the perspective of

how they help achieve textual and interpersonal coherence may generate an in-depth understanding of the use of the English language by Chinese learners.

This study builds on the proposition that by uncovering what more proficient learners, as opposed to less proficient learners, tend to do in the production of spoken discourse, communication problems of language learners can be partly addressed through incorporating the differences into L2 teaching and learning. It attempted to seek discrepancies, if any, through quantitative and qualitative analyses, between the two proficiency groups in their use of discourse markers. It is believed that the use of discourse markers, if found to be a discriminating factor in the quality of students' oral performance, should be part of speaking class syllabi.

The dissertation is comprised of five chapters. Chapter Two provides the research background of this study. It reviews the major approaches to discourse markers and the role of discourse markers in spoken discourse. It also surveys previous literature that investigates the relevance of discourse markers to second language learning. Chapter Three presents the research questions and hypotheses. It introduces the analytic models, the instruments used for data collection, as well as the procedures taken for data analyses. It also reports briefly the results of the pilot study. It finally outlines the specific phases of the primary study. Chapter Four and Chapter Five present the results of quantitative and qualitative analyses of the collected data for ideational and interactional markers respectively. Chapter Six discusses the findings of the study and concludes by providing some pedagogical implications as well as limitations of the study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Within the last several decades, discourse markers have attracted increasing attention from discourse analysts, which resulted in extensive coverage in the literature including articles, overviews and books which represent different theoretical frameworks, approaches and languages. The theoretical status of discourse markers is the focus of discussion which revolves around their definitions, meanings and functions. On the whole, definitions of what a discourse marker is and what it does vary amongst the researchers: not one single definition of the term discourse marker remains undisputed or unaltered by other researchers for their purposes, despite the wide array of existing labels applied in various discourse functions and on various discourse levels beyond the propositional content (Lenk, 1998a), such as pragmatic markers (Brinton, 1996; Fraser, 1996), pragmatic expressions (Erman, 1987), discourse particles (Schourup, 1985), discourse operators (Redeker, 1991), and discourse markers (Fraser, 1996; Lenk, 1998b; Schiffrin, 1987). Such multiplicity in terminology implies distinct theoretical approaches and perspectives.

The disagreement is not restricted to the term used. Although it is suggested by some researchers (e.g. Watts, 1988) that it may be possible to ascribe a common

grammatical function to discourse markers and to account for them in “an extended model of syntax” (p.242), the general agreement is that discourse markers should be understood as a functional-pragmatic category, but not a formal, morphosyntactic one. This perspective presents a primary obstacle to the formation of a homogeneous conceptualization of DMs. For one thing, there are various suggestions as to what morphological form discourse markers should take. Suggestions range from multi-word lexical phrases such as *to return to my original point* (Fraser 1988, 1990), to *well* and *like* (e.g. Watts 1988; Jucker 1993; Schourup, 2001), *or* and *but* (Schiffrin 1987), *oh* and *mhm* (e.g. Jucker & Smith, 1998). *Because, and, then* are included by Schiffrin (1987), but not by Schourup (1985) while *hey* and *aha* are included by Schourup (2001), but not by Schiffrin, 1987). Blakemore (1987) who uses the term "discourse connectives” includes elements such as *therefore, so, after all,* and *moreover*. Erman’s (1987) “pragmatic expressions” consist of more than one word, e.g. *you know, you see* or *I mean*. These terms obviously do not share the same formal properties. Overall, there are no uniform criteria as to what counts as a “discourse marker”, which poses a major challenge in the field.

To make things more complex, the terms proposed are not easily related to the functions they perform. As noted by Jucker and Smith (1998), different perspectives on discourse markers have the tendency to emphasize one particular function of discourse markers. The functions are as varied as helping create discourse coherence (Lenk, 1998a; Redeker, 1990; Risselada & Spooren, 1998; Schiffrin, 1987), marking a sequential relationship between discourse segments (Fraser, 1999), and contributing to the

inferential process of the audience (Andersen, 2001; Blakemore, 1995; Jucker, 1993; Rouchota, 1996), to name a few.

Despite the multiplicity of approaches to discourse markers and the diversity of properties and functions attributed to them, here, following Lenk (1998), Stenström (1994) and Jucker and Ziv(1998), among others, for the sake of convenience, this overview will use the term "discourse marker" (DM hereafter) as a cover name in its widest definition. There is no prescriptive intention in this terminological choice, because it seems to be the term with the widest currency and least restricted range of application; and in line with this philosophy the various terminological instantiations in different research will also be left unchanged.

This review will first provide some background of DMs by referring to Schiffrin's model (including Redeker's modification) because Schiffrin's work lays the foundation for the booming field of DM research. It will then introduce two major approaches to the function of DM (i.e. the coherence-based approach and the relevance-theoretic account) and Fraser's model which not only integrates both perspectives but also provides a clear definition that helps identify those DMs that function on the ideational level. After that, this chapter will briefly describe the relatively theory-independent corpus-based approach which is particularly relevant to examining DMs in spoken context. Then it will discuss the specific role of DMs in spoken interaction. Lastly, it will relate DMs to spoken language learning.

Discourse Markers

Schiffrin and Redeker

Schiffrin's work (1987) is still one of the most detailed and comprehensive studies on DMs, and firmly establishes the term of DM in discourse studies. Her characterization of DMs is solidly based on her perspective of discourse coherence. Discourse is believed to be understood through the structures formed, meanings conveyed and actions performed; its coherence results from the joint efforts to integrate knowing, saying and doing on the part of the interactants. It is the outcome of "the organization of speaker goals and intentions which are taken up and acted upon by hearers, and from the ways in which language is used in service of such goals" (p.10). Schiffrin believes that these elements are interdependent and must be considered when analyzing discourse.

Schiffrin's model of discourse coherence consists of five different planes of talk, namely, an exchange structure, an action structure, an ideational structure, a participation framework, and an information state. Speakers alternate sequential roles in an exchange structure; their speech acts are situated in an action structure in terms of their speaker identities and social settings as well as interrelatedness of actions; they are related to each other and to their utterances in a participation framework; their knowledge and meta-knowledge about ideas are organized and managed in an information state; linguistic units represent propositional, cohesive relations, topic relations and function relations in an ideational structure. This model has both linguistic and non-linguistic components that are inter-connected, the integration of which creates discourse coherence.

The need for DMs arises from the ability of DMs to enable speakers to build and integrate multiple planes and dimensions of "an emergent reality" (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 330), out of which coherent discourse results and discourse tasks are successfully accomplished. Defined as "sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk" (p.31), DMs contribute to the synthesis of the underlying components of talk. Schiffrin proposes that DMs function through placing the utterances that contain them within the emerging local contexts. Such an indexical function is crucial to the understanding of the function of DMs as the contextual coordinates for the production and interpretation of an utterance. Although all the markers are multi-functional on the five different planes, they have one primary function; meanwhile, they also serve a secondary function. For example, *oh* marks information state transitions as the primary function; it signals the production and reception of information, the replacement and redistribution of information, and the receipt of solicited, but unanticipated information. At the same time, it works in the participation framework and in action structures. *So* can be used to mark an information state transition because it represents a shift from unshared to shared knowledge; meanwhile, it also functions in the organization of transitions in the participation framework.

Overall, the core meanings of Schiffrin's DMs lie in the organization of referential meanings at the textual level. DMs themselves do not create any social and/or expressive meanings. Rather, they select a meaning relation from the potential meanings given through the content of utterances and then display that relation. Naturally, the meaning of the marker has to be compatible with that of the surrounding discourse.

Schiffrin's model of the five planes of talk, illuminating as it is in enriching our knowledge about the basic functions of DMs, is questionable on several accounts. Her definition of DMs is too vague; it is unclear what constitutes "a unit of talk". Although Schiffrin proposes that DMs can work selectively at multiple levels of discourse simultaneously, her concern is primarily with relationships at the local level between adjacent utterances. She does not illustrate how markers can signal discourse coherence on a more global level. In some contexts, DMs have been found to also signal relations between discourse segments further apart and should be considered functional on a more global level of discourse. Also, the multifunction of DMs to work on more than one structural level poses an interpretative problem for the hearer: how can a hearer be certain that his interpretations of that discourse marker's function in that particular instance is correct? With this problem unaddressed, Schiffrin left a noticeable gap in her model.

Schiffrin's model is also considered problematic for several other reasons. Redeker (1991) criticizes Schiffrin's model by pointing out that her DMs could actually function on all five planes of talk; consequently, the model is unable to adequately distinguish various DMs. This adds to the problem of uncertainty faced by the addressee when having to cope with DMs since it is not always clear which planes specific DMs belong to. Redeker (1997) also believes that the planes are not all compatible, well-defined or consistently treated, which is a major flaw of Schiffrin's framework. Specifically, she argues that the elements of information structure and participation structure are obviously not on the same level with the other three planes: "the cognitions and attitudes composing those two components concern individual utterances, while the building blocks at the other three planes are relational concepts" (p. 1162). Redeker also

notes that individual DMs are not consistently assigned to planes of the model. It is also noteworthy that Schiffrin's model is only illustrated by several individual linguistic items, without providing a model that characterizes DMs in such a way that substantially helps us understand what types of lexical devices can be considered DMs.

To address the problem of Schiffrin's multiple planes, Redeker (1990) proposes a model that distinguishes three parallel components of discourse coherence: ideational structure, rhetorical structure, and sequential structure. She claims that these three levels are always compatible with each discourse unit; one of them is usually more salient than the others in anchoring an utterance in its context. Her ideational structure, similar to Schiffrin's ideational structure, indicates "the speaker's commitment to the existence of that relation in the world the discourse describes" (p. 369), including relations such as temporal sequence, elaboration, cause, etc., which can be signaled by simple connectives such as subordinator *(that* with sentential complements), relative pronouns (e.g. *that, who, which*), semantically rich connectives such as *but, because, as, so, what, how, why*. Her rhetorical structure is roughly identical with Schiffrin's action structure, which expresses the speaker's illocutionary intentions. The third level, called "sequential structure", is claimed to be "an extended variant" of Schiffrin's exchange structure by Redeker (1991, p. 1143); it represents the paratactic and/or hypotactic relations between discourse segments that are adjacent in a loose sense. Paratactic relations are those between completed segments adjacent at the same level, such as lists of topics or subtopics, actions, agenda points and so on. Hypotactic relations refer to transitions "involving interruption or suspension of an incomplete unit with parenthetical material,"

such as those leading into or out of a commentary, correction, paraphrase, aside, digression or interruption segment (p.1168).

Within this framework, Redeker defines what she calls 'discourse operators' as: 'word[s] or phrase[s]…that [are] uttered with the primary function of bringing to the listener's attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse context" (1991, p.1168). However, Muller (2005) does not find Redeker's model more convincing than Schiffrin's because its definitions are not any more accurate and it does not account for all uses of DMs either. For example, Muller points out that Redeker's sequential transitions seem to be an aspect of ideational relations, unlike Schiffrin's exchange structure whose basic units are turns. Therefore, Schiffrin's model is not able to account for turn-transitions or the negotiation of interpersonal relationships. Overall, as Muller notes, Redeker's model seems to be merely a deviation of Schiffrin's pioneering work which firmly established the status of DMs in discourse and verbal communication. The following two sections will introduce two other major theory-based perspectives on the function of DMs: Coherence Theory and Relevance Theory, which are complementary to each other and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of DMs.

Coherence Theory

Unlike the above models proposed by Schiffrin and Redeker, particularly that of Schiffrin which encompasses various aspects of spoken discourse, Coherence Theory is largely built on coherence relations within texts. According to Coherence Theory, as succinctly summarized by Rouchota (1996), the most important property of texts is

coherence, which results from and is analyzable in terms of a definable set of coherence relations, i.e. a set of implicit relations that bind/hold the text together. The audience establishes coherence by relating different information units in the text. The recovery of such coherence relations is essential for text comprehension. These are the three assumptions that are generally upheld by text analysts. For example, Mann and Thompson's (1988) Rhetorical Structure Theory, an approach to textual coherence and organization, accounts for coherence in a comprehensive way to describe a hierarchical, connected textual structure in functional terms, where "every part of a text has a role to play, function to fulfill, with respect to the other parts of the text" (Taboaba, 2006, p.570). Sanders and Noordman (2000) also suggest that coherence relations are an integral part of the cognitive representation.

In Coherence Theory, DMs can signal various coherence relations and make such relations explicit. Although Knot and Dale (1994) point out that in some cases the hearer has to make inferences about the particular relation that binds two sentences based on other clues, the relations are mostly associated with a typical connective word, although very often the relationship between cue phrases and the relations they signal is many-to-many. For example, the relation of concession can be signaled by conjunctions such as *but, regardless, rather,* etc., as well as verbs such as *concede* (Taboaba, 2006). However, some relations are not always clearly marked by any relational phrases; in some cases, they are rarely signaled, e.g. evaluation, background, summary, elaboration (Taboaba, 2006). Sanders and Noordman (2000) also warn against overestimating the usefulness of DMs by claiming that linguistic markers are only expressions of coherence relations that guide the audience toward selecting the right coherence relation. Nevertheless, the

importance of DMs cannot be ignored since they guide the text receiver in the recognition of coherence relations which hold together different parts of the discourse, which are at least partly responsible for the perceived coherence of a text (Taboaba, 2006).

Despite its power in explaining text organization, the applicability of coherence theory in spoken interaction is challenged. Redeker (1991) contends that coherence theory cannot fully account for spoken discourse, because it merely depends on the text-inherent properties without taking into account the communicative situation, such as the extralinguistic environment. This is particularly important to note when considering that spoken discourse is affected by various contextual factors. Along this line, based on the assumption that discourse is hierarchically structured, Unger (1996) also argues against treating coherence relations as cognitively real entities. Therefore, the model of coherence relations cannot fully explain conversational coherence and does not do adequate justice to the motivation for the existence of DMs.

Relevance Theory

Another major approach to understanding the function of DMs is the relevance-theoretic account, which accounts for the role of DMs from a more general perspective of text processing. Instead of assuming that DMs fulfill the function of signaling coherence relations, this theory sees DMs as devices providing instructions for the comprehension of utterances. It states that a speaker has a specific interpretation in mind and expects the hearer to arrive at that interpretation. To obtain the intended interpretation, the hearer must process that utterance in the intended context. The selection of the context is governed by considerations of optimal relevance. As put by Sperber and Wilson (1986),

"every act of communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance" which requires a certain interpretation (p.158). Recognition of the relevance of an utterance can help a hearer understand how different parts of the conversation "fit together well and form a united whole" (p.124). Based on this assumption, the speaker may have reason to believe that the hearer will select the appropriate contextual elements for interpretation without extra help from the speaker. Meanwhile, the hearer undergoes a continuous process of figuring out how new contributions and the prior conversation are relevant to each other within the context.

However, accessing the intended context involves a cost. The greater the processing effort, the less relevant that interpretation is. This means that to achieve efficiently the conversational goal of relevance, unnecessary cognitive effort should be minimized. In other words, the less the cognitive effort needed to understand a given utterance, the greater its relevance. As a cost-benefit model of human cognition, relevance theory (Blakemore, 1987; Sperber & Wilson, 1986) claims that human cognition processes are organized to achieve maximum cognitive effect for minimum processing effort. Signaling the relevance of an utterance in the entire context of a conversation is thus functional in explaining the existence of the utterance in that particular context by indicating to the hearer how it connects with the surrounding parts of the conversation. That is, the speaker can direct the hearer by resorting to certain guides for the benefit of the hearer to give a clear indication of his/her intended meaning.

The extent and degree of guidance provided by the speaker will affect the hearer's interpretation of the development of the given discourse. The more guidance is provided, the easier it is for the hearer to construct the coherence intended by the speaker.

According to Blakemore (1987), DMs are such guides at the speaker's disposal that effectively direct the audience's interpretative process and help reduce the processing effort to a considerable extent. Using DMs thus assists the hearer in moving toward a perception of the higher degree of relevance of an utterance in a particular context; this ensures "the hearer's continuous cooperative participation by enabling him to follow the flow of conversation more easily" (Lenk, 1998, p.24). In other words, DMs are signals that facilitate the hearer's integration of materials by narrowing down the scope of potential interpretations of the utterance available to the hearer (Muller, 2005). Like Fraser, relevance theorists such as Blakemore believe that the function of discourse connectives is primarily procedural, not representational or propositional as claimed by coherence theorists in that they provide instructions for the representation of propositional content of the discourse.

Such a view of DMs has been widely endorsed. For example, according to Lenk (1997), DMs, when used to mark topic boundaries, contribute to the various mental processes that take place between participants in a conversation. On the one hand, they facilitate the planning processes on the speaker's side because they help the speaker understand her own sequence of utterances. On the other hand, they help with the hearer's interpretative processes by guiding the hearer towards a better understanding of the speaker's intentions as to how various parts are connected to each other. That is, they allow the hearer to draw inferences about the intended relevance of a particular utterance in relation to the immediate context, thereby helping develop the participants' understanding of the coherence of the entire conversational interaction, which ultimately enhances considerably the smooth flow of the interaction.

Researchers have studied the role of some individual DMs within the framework of relevance theory. Sperber and Wilson (1986) discuss connectives such as *so* that encode a procedural constraint to the hearer by instructing the hearer to understand the relevance of the upcoming utterance as being consequential to the prior one. Unger (1996) explains further that *so* does not add to the referential meaning of the utterance that contains it; rather, it functions as a constraint on the inferential computations. Blakemore (1987) suggests that DMs, such as *and, after all, you see, but, moreover, furthermore,* can constrain the hearer's interpretation possibilities of the speaker's intentions by signaling the interdependence of the relevance of discourse segments. Rouchota (1996) shows that *also* is a cue to the hearer, indicating that the proposition it precedes should be processed in parallel with some other proposition. Jucker's study (1993) of the discourse marker *well* argues that relevance theory is the only theory that can accommodate all the uses of *well* including marking insufficiency, mitigating face-threat, framing and delaying, because it provides plausible explanation for all instances of the word cited in other work. In general, as pointed out by Jucker (1993), the merit of this theory lies in that it is built on a general theory of human communication based on cognitive principles.

Jucker and Smith (1998) and Jucker and Ziv (1998) extend the cognitive role of DMs to the establishment and negotiation of conversationalists' common ground. Hobbs (1982) earlier notes that in a typical event of discourse, the speaker speaks because he is aware of the gap in what he and the hearer know, believe, imagine or desire; he tries to bridge such gap for certain purposes by providing some connection; on the other hand, the listener is also active in making inferences to fill the gap. Jucker and her colleagues

also argue that in addition to their cognitive perspective of guiding the processing of the information contained in an utterance, DMs are used to "reconcile both her own state of knowledge with information provided by her interlocutor and her model of what he already knows with the state of knowledge she hopes to create in him" (p.197). The notion of common ground considerably enhances our understanding of the cognitive importance of DMs in various forms of interaction.

Important similarities exist between Coherence Theory and Relevance Theory in their account of DMs. They both agree that DMs have a constraining function (Rouchota, 1996). Within coherence theory, DMs constrain the propositions connected by the coherence relations to be recovered by the hearer in their attempt to interpret a discourse, while relevance theorists see the constraining function of DMs differently as directing the interpretation process towards the intended contextual effects. These two seemingly distinct perspectives are not entirely exclusive to each other. They can be complementary in the account of the role of DMs in the accomplishment of communicative tasks. Hobbs (1982) captures this compatibility in the following quote:

> It is thus part of the speaker's job to provide the necessary linkage and to try to manipulate the listener's inference process to lead him to the correct interpretations. This description of the discourse situation enables us to categorize the coherence relations according to their communicative functions (p.228).

While the coherence framework focuses more on the textual functions of DMs, Relevance Theory is grounded on cognitive processes. Rouchota (1996) points out that coherence theory does not provide the motivation or psychological explanation for using

linguistic devices like discourse connectives. Relevance theory is more advantageous in that it acknowledges explicitly the facilitating role of DMs. It stresses as a basic assumption that the speaker attempts to ensure the intended interpretation by pointing to the inferential process the receiver is expected to go through. The procedural instruction encoded by the connective is powerful in helping the hearer figure out an optimally relevant interpretation of the utterance that contains the connective. Overall, this theory is important in that it makes possible a more flexible perspective of discourse and provides a unified account of the functions of DMs within a general theory of communication (Stenström, 2002; Unger, 1996). On the other hand, the value of Coherence Theory cannot be overlooked because it contributes to our understanding of DMs by attending to the textual connections they help build between various parts of discourse.

Fraser

A DM model that deserves our particular attention is the one proposed by Fraser (1988, 1990, 1999), who looks at DMs from a grammatical-pragmatic perspective, because it both reflects the role of DMs in marking coherence relations as well as acknowledges their significance in influencing the interpretation of the addressee towards the intended meaning of the speaker. Another important advantage is that it provides a tool for us to identify DMs. This theory builds on a distinction between content and pragmatic meaning. Content meaning, often referred to as the propositional or referential content, is “a more or less explicit representation of some state of the world the speaker intends to bring to the hearer’s attention by means of the literal interpretation of the sentence” (Fraser, 1990, p.385). For example, the basic content meanings of *John loves*

Mary, *Does John love Mary*, and *I suggest that John loves Mary* are the same. Content meaning is conveyed by lexical meaning and syntactic structures and is fundamental to literal communication. Pragmatic meaning concerns the speaker's communicative intentions or direct messages conveyed in uttering the sentence.

DMs are a type of linguistic expressions that encode the latter type of meaning, i.e. pragmatic meaning. Specifically, they signal comments that specify the type of sequential discourse relationship between utterances. By definition, they are "lexical expressions which are syntactically independent of the basic sentence structure and have a general core meaning which signals the relationship of the current utterance to the prior utterance" (Fraser, 1988, p.29). Mostly drawn from the syntactic classes of conjunctions, adverbs, and prepositional phrases and idioms, they are lexical expressions that do not constitute a separate and homogenous syntactic category (Fraser, 1999). In other words, their value is not grammatical; nor do they contribute to the propositional content of the discourse segments they relate. Rather, they provide links between discourse segments by indicating to the hearer how one discourse segment is intended to be interpreted in terms of its relation to the other. Except for a few cases (e.g. *because*, *although*, *while*), their presence does not affect the grammaticality or intelligibility of a sentence.

Fraser (1999) categorizes DMs into two groups: "those that relate the explicit interpretation conveyed by S2 [the second discourse segment] with some aspect associated with the segment S l (the first discourse segment]; and those that relate the topic of S2 to that of S1" (p.950). Fraser does not explain what she means by "discourse segment". However, a review of her work suggests that "discourse segment" seems to be an utterance that can stand on its own.

The value of DMs lies in their control of the interpretation of the message conveyed by one discourse segment in relation to the interpretation of another (Fraser, 1998). DMs provide a useful signal about the commitment the speaker makes about the relationship between the current segment and the prior segment. Therefore, DMs give instructions on the processing of utterance relations, and thus have a core meaning that is procedural, not conceptual. They constrain the interpretation of messages and force a relationship between discourse segments. According to Fraser, the way discourse segments are interpreted should be agreeable with the use of particular DMs for a sequence to be coherent. For example, in *I love Boston drivers. However, I seldom yell at them*, the presence of *however* requires that the first segment be interpreted as ironic since the underlying meanings of the two segments are supposed to be contrastive to each other.

Fraser's suggestions help clarify our understanding of what types of expressions should be labeled as DMs. However, her taxonomy is not exactly precise on several accounts. The main argument is that, like Schiffrin who defines DMs as "sequentially dependent elements" (Schiffrin, 1987, p.31) and the majority of coherence-based theorists, Fraser also implies that DMs only relate the utterance that hosts them to the linguistic co-text, not to the context in a wider sense. While admitting that the marking of co-textual connections might be the prototypical function of DMs, Hansen (1996), along with Blakemore (1987), argues that there are relations signaled by a linguistic device that are not between linguistically realized meaning. Blakemore's example (*so, you've spent all your money*) is perfectly acceptable when uttered to start a conversation at the sight of someone coming with an armful of parcels. It is obvious here that DMs are also useful

expressions when used in connection with non-linguistic context. More specifically, as advocated by Hansen (1996), they not only guide interpretations in a given context, but also actively facilitate the construction of that context.

To understand this limitation in a different way, we can compare Fraser's grammatical-pragmatic framework with Schiffrin's sociolinguistic model. Fraser's focus is restricted to the relationships on the message level of discourse, while Schiffrin's model considers various aspects of the communicative situation. Consequently, their views on communicative meaning are different. Fraser approaches communicative meaning as speaker intention and subsequent hearer recognition of intention. Schiffrin's (2001) model assumes that communicative meaning is co-constructed by the participants of the interaction and "emergent from jointly recognized sequential expectations and contingencies of talk-in-interaction" (p.72). Schiffrin's model acknowledges the multifunctionality of DMs on different planes that facilitate the integration of a variety of simultaneous processes going on during the construction of discourse. Therefore, as expounded by Schiffrin (2001), her model clearly incorporates various aspects of the communication situation, thus enabling us to understand DMs from a more comprehensive and systematic perspective. Another drawback of Fraser's taxonomy is that she does not make it clear what she means by discourse segments that her DMs are claimed to link, although it can be inferred from her examples that this notion seems to be roughly equivalent to the concept of clause and sentence that are relatively complete in meaning and syntactical structure.

Nevertheless, Fraser's model has an important advantage in terms of DM identification. As mentioned earlier, Schiffrin's vague definition and characterization of

DMs presents practical and major obstacles in its application. This problem is not found with Fraser's framework which clarifies the territory of DMs by defining that DMs can be syntactically separated from the basic sentence structure and indicates the relationship between utterances. In addition to helping with the interpretation of a given DM in a specific textual context, as claimed by Fraser (1990), more importantly, it provides a feasible method to identify DMs, which brings considerable convenience for various lines of research in the sphere of discourse analysis. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning again that this model primarily focuses on connectives that link textual units; in authentic communication, particularly spoken interaction, there are lexical devices that relate the speaker to the interactional context. To understand such a functional distinction, it is necessary to look into how spoken discourse is characterized as distinguished from written discourse before going into the way these lexical devices are associated with spoken discourse.

Discourse Marker and Spoken Interaction

Spoken vs. Written Discourse

Considerable amount of research suggests that major differences exist between spoken and written discourse, which, according to Brown and Yule (1983), are based on the phenomenon that the former is essentially "transitory" and the latter designed to be "permanent" (p.14). Overall, speech is characterized by being fragmented and involved; it is generally unplanned and produced under certain cognitive and processing constraints, or communicative (Hansen, 1996), as reflected in the messiness related to filled and unfilled pauses, repetitions, and incomplete grammatical structures (Chafe,

1982). In contrast, writing is more integrated, distant and detached from its audience (Chafe, 1982; Nattinger & Decarrico, 1992), which is due to the absence of features of surrounding circumstances that provide shared assumptions with their audience. As a result, it is more self-contained and detached from the physical context where it is produced (Chafe, 1982).

Time constraint is, according to Lenk (1998), a major cause for such distinctions between spoken and written discourse. Usually the writer is under less constraint because he/she only needs to deal with "the appropriate indexing of what comes next and how it is related to the overall scheme of writing" (p.18). This results in a relatively smooth topic development and clear discourse structure. Unplanned casual conversations are structurally different because they take place under substantial time constraint; the required mental planning load of spoken discourse is naturally heavier than that of written discourse, on top of the physical oral production of the utterance. Insertion of ideas has to be additionally marked if the speaker wants the hearer to understand the textual structure as intended.

Some other aspects of situational needs are also associated with the distinction between discourse production in the spoken medium (not including recitations or reading from a prepared manuscript) and in the written medium. For example, as Hansen (1996) explains, in the phonic medium, discourse production is an on-line, incremental process that involves "the transformation of a non-linguistic hierarchically-structured mental representation into linear linguistic expression" (p.109). Speakers are under continuous cognitive and interactional pressure of not losing the floor too early in certain turn-taking conditions. Furthermore, spoken interaction involves negotiations of actions, meanings

and relevancies with the interlocutor, as well as possible intrusions and change of current conditions in various ways. These situational needs are not expected to be seen in the case of writing.

Spoken discourse has also been examined from the perspective of the sources people need to draw on in the completion of communicative tasks. In order for the message to be properly interpreted by the hearer(s), the speaker needs to avoid any misunderstanding caused by possible misleading productions (Celce-Muria & Olshtain, 2000). To address such demands, the speaker must consider both linguistically and pragmatically controlled resources in order to ensure successful accomplishment of speech tasks. Linguistically, speakers have to use their grammatical competence (morphological and syntactic knowledge) to produce linguistically proper forms of utterances as well as phonologically intelligible sounds. Besides, in order to create meaningful utterances, the speaker also has to incorporate his/her understanding of factors of appropriacy which are under the control of the speech situation and the dominant cultural and social norms. As noted by Celce-Muria and Olshtain, “at any point the level of knowledge and processing skill might facilitate or interfere with the production of the spoken discourse, but ultimately it is the contextual features that affect the efficacy of communication” (p.168). This is particularly true for people learning a non-native language.

In general, as succinctly summarized by Stubbs (1996), we can understand the dichotomy of written and spoken language as follows: written language is in most cases “standard, formal, planned, edited, public and non-interactive”, whereas spoken language is typically “casual, spontaneous, private and face-to-face” (p. 64). As a result,

propositional coherence seems to be more characteristic of written language while interactional coherence is more typically found in spoken discourse where discourse participants "share the immediate pragmatic context of communication, little advance planning is done, and immediate feedback is possible" (Lautamatti, 1990, p.34).

Earlier attempts at generalizing features characteristic of written and spoken modes of text are challenged by researchers who believe that new approaches are needed to have a broader view on mode-related linguistic features. Biber (1986) represents one of such early efforts. He questions the appropriateness of using a single textual dimension to describe and discriminate the relations among various English text types. Considering the complexity of the communicative possibilities offered by a language, he proposes a multidimensional view of text types which is claimed to better fit our general knowledge of actual language use. His factor analyses, which were based on a variety of linguistic features measured in various spoken and written text types, generated three fundamental parameters of textual variation which underlie speech and writing in English: interactive vs. edited text, abstract vs. situated content, and reported vs. immediate style; the first of the three dimensions is similar to Brown and Yule's (1983) and Nattinger and Decarrico's (1992) distinction between interactional (those that establish and maintain relationships) vs. transactional discourse (those that transmit information). Biber's dimensions appear more comprehensive and compatible with findings of prior studies.

Lautamatti (1990) shares Biber's concern about the distinction between spoken and written language. She argues that most of the listed features are better accounted for as factors distinguishing formality of styles rather than modes of language use. This is reflected in Chafe and Danielewicz's (1987) observation that conversation is

distinguishable from writing and more formal speech. Hansen (1996) also argues against treating the distinction between spoken and written language as an absolute dichotomy. Instead, she suggests placing individual texts along a continuum of formality according to their type, with informal, largely phatic conversation between intimates as one endpoint and written academic prose as the other endpoint of this continuum. She illustrates this through the examples of a letter written by a ten year old to her pen pal, which bears more features with the "spoken" end, as opposed to a bishop's Easter Sunday sermon, which is closer to the "written" end of the continuum.

Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) draw a distinction between social conversation and non-social discourse. The former is interactional in nature both in form and function, while the latter, such as academic lectures and the discourse of giving directions, or various meetings, is typically transactional because its primary purpose is to transmit factual information. In transactional discourse, DMs not only signal the relationship between one piece of discourse and another; they also help with top-down processing in discourse comprehension since they impose patterns by organizing discourse at various levels (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). By contrast, in interactional discourse, which is more random and looser in structure, such a feature of DMs is not typically present to indicate distinct levels and patterns of co-ordination and subordination, and mark interrelationships of discourse content in such a structured way, as they do in transactional discourse, because the primary use of interactional discourse is expressing social relations and personal attitudes.

Accordingly, interactional and transactional discourses are different in the types of organizational linguistic items typically used (Nattinger & Decarrico, 1992). In the

case of transactional discourse, which is often organized by a framework discernible to the audience to benefit their comprehension, macro-organizers, which signal the overall direction of a given discourse, are the primary markers of this organizational pattern, which provide clues to the overall direction and organization of discourse content. The markers in interactional discourse do not function in the same way. Rather, they are used mostly to maintain social interaction. They are signals indicating to the hearer that a topic is being changed, a piece of information is being evaluated or being related to another piece. But their use is limited because social interactional discourse does not usually contain a large amount of factual information expected to be conveyed in a strictly organized way. However, it is important to note that there isn't a clear-cut line to draw between the lexical devices used for transactional discourse and interactional discourse. The distinctions made above are merely a matter of degree.

In spite of the justifiable challenge against distinguishing spoken and written discourse, the dichotomy is still valid in an important sense. As argued by Nattinger and Decarrico (1992), although transactional and interactional discourse manifest different uses of DMs, and transactional spoken discourse and transactional written discourse both transmit factual information, DMs used for them are not necessarily identical in form. The common functions of lexical terms do not have a one-on-one correspondence with their forms. For example, to mark consequences, *as a result, therefore* are typically used in written transactional discourse, whereas *so, this means that, what happens is X* are more frequent in spoken transactional discourse. Also, as noted by Crystal (1988), expressions such as *you know* act as the lubricant which is conducive to the smooth and efficient performance of the complex task of spontaneous speech production and

interaction. Schiffrin (1987), among others, also sees lexical terms such as *you know* contribute to conversational coherence by serving as contextual coordinates. In other words, some DMs are more characteristically seen in spoken interaction than in written interaction.

Such major differences in these two modes of speech have prompted research interest in DMs featuring speaking and writing. For example, Brown and Yule (1983) found that the presence of interactive expressions like *well* and *oh* contributes to the impression that spoken language has less densely packed information than expository prose. Stenström (1990) also provides some examples of linguistic devices that are more characteristic of speech than of writing or occur solely in speech, such as *well, you know, you see, actually, sort of,* etc. Nattinger and Decarrico (1992), in their distinction, found that certain lexical markers are common in spoken discourse and serve functions not normally found in written texts, such as *you know, as far as I am concerned, by and large, for the most part, let's get back to the point*. The consensus is that certain DMs are more likely to be found in spoken language than in written language.

The distinctiveness of such lexical items has sparked immense research interest in the function of DMs in spoken discourse. A corpus-based approach is particularly fruitful in revealing the role these lexical items play in spoken interaction. The following section will review briefly the justification for this approach in DM studies provided by Aijmer (2004) and Muller (2005).

Corpus-based Approach to DMs

Aijmer (2004), among other researchers such as Muller (2005), while agreeing that DMs function as instructions to the hearer's interpretation of the text in a certain way, proposes a model that resorts to theoretical notions from discourse analysis such as move, act, exchange, which are supposedly better able to address these issues because they provide a useful perspective on where and why discourse particles occur. She is particularly concerned about those markers (e.g. phrases such as *you know,* single words such as *well, like*) that are prevalent in informal conversation.

Both Aijmer and Muller work towards showing how corpus linguistics can contribute to the description of discourse particles and enhance our understanding of their function in discourse. Unlike top-down approaches such as Coherence Theory and Relevance Theory that focus on discourse structures and the role of DMs in facilitating the processing and comprehension of the text, they adopt a bottom-up model that describes linguistically individual particles. The reason is that discourse particles are "placed with great precision at different places" in the discourse and give important clues to the segmentation and processing of discourse (Aijmer, 2004, p.1). Muller and Aijmer do not follow any existing models or frameworks; instead, they take a corpus-driven approach, according to which, evidence from the data takes precedence over theoretical constructions; to put it differently, data categorization is adjusted to fit the data, not vice versa.

Aijmer's corpus-based approach examines longer stretches of text and analyzes functions of discourse particles in their social and situational context. It also takes into account the effects of linguistic and contextual factors such as collocations, prosody, text

type and position in the discourse. In Aijmer's (2002) account, discourse particles are characteristically polysemous with conventional discourse functions on both textual and interpersonal levels since they are indexed to attitudes, to participants and to the text (2002). They are flexible and are believed to occupy different positions in the utterance. This method is particularly useful in dealing with spoken discourse because it allows us to consider DMs in discourse contexts beyond turn boundaries. For example, the value of the marker *you know* does not rest in changing or enriching the propositional content of the utterance, but in involving the hearer in the interpretation of the utterance by indicating that the information is shared.

Despite its apparent problem of not leading to a unified account of the conceptualization, characterization and function of DMs, this corpus-driven perspective further broadens our understanding of the unique pragmatic value of DMs and allows considerably more flexibility in dealing with DMs than theory-based frameworks. Along with most researchers in the field, Aijmer upholds the view that DMs facilitate the interpretation of the utterance through means other than propositional truth-semantics. She, among others, rejects the view that discourse particles are simply trivial decorations or a verbal 'crutch' in discourse indicating low speaking proficiency (He & Lindsey, 1998, p.134). In particular, this approach contributes significantly to the understanding of the role of DMs in spoken interaction. It helps researchers find out how DMs provide clues about the speaker's attitude to the hearer and surrounding discourse and greases the interaction between discourse participants. This approach has made it possible for us to identify the use of a particular type of lexical terms that are connected with the complex

mechanism of spoken interaction. The next section will introduce some of the corpus-based endeavors in examining the use of such lexical terms in spoken interaction.

DMs Specific to Spoken Interaction

DMs have been found to be a powerful device associated with conversation management. For example, Byron and Heeman (1998) in their investigation of the role DMs have in signaling the upcoming speech in task-oriented dialog found that specific DM use is connected with specific conversational moves, adjacency pairs, or the speaker's orientation to information presented in the prior turn. Their data showed that DMs could be used at the beginning of a contribution to indicate the way it is related to the current discourse state. For example, some expressions are used to mark changes in the global discourse structure: *by the way* signals the start of a digression, and *anyway* signals the return from a digression. DMs inform of the speaker's orientation to message given in the preceding turn and coordinate mutual understanding of shared beliefs and discourse structure. It can be inferred that DMs with their salient functions in discourse organization can contribute to natural discourse development and people's effectiveness in managing and understanding the conversation flow.

DMs also improve people's understanding of a conversation as a coherent whole. Lenk's (1997) work is particularly illuminating in this respect. She approaches DMs as lexical items used in spoken interaction that have a discourse structuring function for the benefit of the hearer. She believes that everyday conversations have features such as various topics and interactional moves whose connections sometimes have to be properly indicated so that these topics and moves can be clearly recognizable. Appropriate use of

signaling devices can considerably aid the audience in the understanding of different parts of a conversation as coherent (i.e. how they all fit together), thereby aiding people in their participation in the interaction, not only between adjacent utterances but also between segments that are more remotely placed. In Lenk's words, "they are the items that run the whole exchange into a sensible and comprehensible interaction" (p.3).

Stenström's (1989) work addresses the use of pragmatic markers in spoken interaction in the form of two-party dialogues in a more detailed and systematic fashion. Despite the difficulty in classifying this type of item due to the multifunctionality at multiple levels and the many-to-many relations between form and function, she did manage to put the linguistic expressions of concern into three categories. The first category includes lexical items that are only interactional and cannot be described as syntactic elements of clauses (e.g. *ah, aha, mhm, oh, yeah, yes*). Those DMs in the second category are mainly interactional and include those primarily used as interactional devices as well as clause elements (e.g. *alright, I mean, I see, no, OK, please, right, sure,* tags, *thank you, that's alright, that's right, well, you know, you see*). The third group, known as also interactional, are those adverbials used as interactional or discourse-organizing devices (e.g. *absolutely, actually, anyway, certainly, honestly, however, indeed, in fact, maybe, now, obviously, of course, perhaps, probably, really*).

Stenström (1994) later groups her lexical devices identified in the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English into interactional signals and discourse markers. The former are used to start, carry on and terminate the conversation. They appeal for feedback (e.g. *right*), give feedback (e.g. *I see*), respond (e.g. *yes, that's right*), involve the listener in the conversation (e.g. *you know*), and so on. Therefore, they play a crucial role in

guaranteeing that the communication proceeds smoothly. The latter (discourse markers, i.e. *well, OK*) are used to organize and hold the turn and to mark boundaries in the discourse. They help the speaker organize the discourse. They serve to start a conversation, introduce and mark the end of topic, introduce a digression and mark the resumption of the old topic, and signal the end of a conversation. Overall, these studies indicate clearly that there are linguistic expressions that are typically facilitative in maintaining interactional coherence. Investigating how these items affect the interactional process has become a vigorous area of research in helping people understand the mechanism of communication.

DMs and Comprehensibility

The value of DMs in spoken interaction is reflected more directly in the comprehensibility of speech production. Explicit marking is an indispensable factor in discourse processing for native speakers, which has been recognized by a sizable portion of research on native speakers' spoken output. As noted by Tyler and Bro (1992),

> in any communicative situation, participants bring a set of expectations concerning how discourse-structuring cues signal relationships among the expressed ideas... When [these] cues are missing or are used in unexpected ways... [listeners] find a meaningful interpretation difficult to construct, and therefore judge the discourse as incoherent (pp. 74-75).

Dunkel and Davis (1994) also note that listening comprehension is affected greatly by the interrelatedness of various units and structure of a discourse. Specifically, although DMs do not represent an independent class in the syntactic structure, they are important in

spoken language because they can address the cognitive demand of the interaction. There is sufficient evidence that discourse cues can facilitate the construction of a coherent interpretation of spontaneously produced discourse on the one hand while attending to the sociocultural aspect of communication on the other hand (Muller, 2005). The absence or misuse of DMs fails to provide appropriate direction to the audience and may prevent them from building a coherent interpretation of the discourse.

Some research concentrates on the role of textual structuring cues in the comprehension of instructional texts. For example, the work by Hron, Kurbjuhn, Mandl, and Schnotz (1985), Tyler (1992) and MacDonald, Richard and White (2000) all showed that markers signaling textual relations facilitated the audience's comprehension of lectures. A more recent investigation by Perez and Macia (2002) also proved that various connectives that help the speaker organize ideas affected the level of listening comprehension. As noted by Tyler (1994), listeners continually make "constrained guesses" about speakers' intentions (p.245); cueing such intentions considerably influences the understanding of listeners.

Another group of studies addresses the use of DMs peculiar to spoken interaction. Flowerdew and Tauroza (1995) and Fox Tree and Schrock (1999) analyzed their use in lectures. The former showed that expressions such as *well, OK*, and *now* which signal relationships between segments of discourse had a positive effect on comprehension. The latter proved that *oh* contributed to the comprehension of a spoken lecture. In Ostman's (1995) and Ferrara's (1997) work, *anyway* helped manage discourse and signaled to the listener about the organization of the talk in spontaneous speech and narratives respectively. In short, DMs are used by native speakers both to plan their own speech and

comprehend others'. Nevertheless, methodologically, it is necessary to clarify what types of lexical terms are counted as DMs before going into the specific function and use of DMs.

Considering the value of DMs in verbal communication, it is not surprising that knowledge of DMs benefits various strands of research; it can inform us of the "properties of a set of frequently used expressions, the organization of social interactions and situations in which they are used, but also about the cognitive, expressive, social and textual competence of those who use them" (Schiffrin, 2001, p.67). Analyzing the use of DMs is a productive means that uncovers how interlocutors intend to monitor the interpretation process and their social involvement in verbal communication (Watts, 1988). One of the major lines of interest is the relevance of DMs to language learning. The following section will first introduce briefly how DMs relate to communicative competence and then focus the discussion on their relevance to second language learning.

Discourse Marker and Communicative Competence

Theory

The concept of "communicative competence", defined as "the knowledge which enables someone to use a language effectively and their ability to use this knowledge for communication" (Cook, 1998, p.174), has been given overarching importance in language teaching and learning and represented a revolutionary paradigm shift from the traditional focus on grammar. As stipulated by Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), it is made up of several sub-competencies: grammatical, strategic, and sociolinguistic which was later separated into sociocultural and discourse competence.

Strategic competence refers to strategies one can resort to when there is a risk of communication breakdown which often results from misunderstanding or limited vocabulary. Discourse competence concerns the combination of grammatical forms and meanings to achieve unity of spoken and written text with cohesion in form and coherence in meaning. This composition of communicative competence corresponds with features characterizing communicative events, including the presence of constraints on language use and clues to utterance interpretation in discourse and sociocultural contexts. Competent communicators are depicted by Ellis (1994) as those individuals who are "more actively engaged in the interaction and the communication context, …seek to control the situation in pursuit of their goals, … tie their utterances together in a more complex fashion, … [and] produce more verbal embellishment, elaboration, and intricacies" (p.164).

Pragmatic competence is proposed as a cover term for the above non-grammatical components of a language learner's communicative competence, as opposed to linguistic competence, and an important goal of second language learning by Bachman (1990), Kasper (1997) and Nattinger and Decarrico (1992), among others. One's language knowledge and ability concerns knowing how to create sentences and "prefabricated patterns" (grammatical competence), as well as knowing "how to select and retrieve ready-made form/function composites (pragmalinguistic competence) for appropriate situations or contexts (socio-pragmatic competence)" (Nattinger & Decarrico, 1992, p.13). Pragmatic competence is important in that it is associated with the speaker's ability to access grammatical forms as "pre-assembled chunks" to use them appropriately in particular contexts of use (Jorwaski, 1998; Trillo, 2002). A lack of this competence on the

part of learners may affect negatively the achievement of smooth communication. Therefore, pragmatic competence is by no means something extra or ornamental; rather, it is what people can not afford to overlook in their language learning. This perspective is consistent with Nattinger and Decarrico's (1992) comment that linguistic competence should be extended to include ability of speakers to use language to attain meaning in context.

Knowledge of DMs is an intrinsic part of one's communicative competence. DMs have been considered relevant to various spheres of communicative competence. For example, sociolinguistic knowledge, which is needed to negotiate the relationship between speaker and hearer during a conversation, involves the use of words such as *well* or *you know*; with regard to discourse competence, certain DMs (e.g. *however*, *still*) contribute to global discourse coherence (Lenk, 1998). Ability to use discourse connectors such as *well*, *oh*, *I see*, *okay* are also treated as part of one's discourse knowledge. Strategic competence involves the ability of someone to use DMs to express themselves in case of lexical difficulties or to appeal for the addressee's understanding. Williamson (2005) adds that the use of DMs constitutes an aspect of strategic competence that people can exploit to compensate for skills that they lack to exert immediate effect on the listener's comprehension. This discrepancy is closely related to the way communicative competence is categorized. A more general ascription is to assign DMs to pragmatic competence, as opposed to linguistic competence, as proposed by researchers such as Nattinger and Decarrico (1992). For example, according to Wierzbicka (1991), DMs as useful conversational devices can maintain discourse cohesiveness and communicative effectiveness in interpersonal and cross-cultural

interaction. They are part of one's ability to use language in "culturally, socially and situationally appropriate ways" (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000, p.433).

The way DMs relate to communicative competence has important implications for second language teaching and learning. Cots (1992) states that achievement in foreign language learning is evaluated against the similarity of the linguistic behavior of the learner to that of the native speakers of the language (as cited in Muller, 2005). Thus, the fact that DMs have an important role in native speaker communication leads naturally to the assumption that they should be a learning objective for non-native speakers who want to communicate effectively in the target language. This role of DMs in foreign language learning is observed by Svartvik (1980) as follows:

> If a foreign language learner says five sheeps or he goed, he can be corrected by practically every native speaker. If, on the other hand, he omits a "well", the likely reaction will be that he is dogmatic, impolite, boring, awkward to talk to etc., but a native speaker cannot pinpoint an "error" (p. 171).

Such negative judgments are certainly not desirable for most learners of English even if native-like competence is not necessarily always the goal. Yoshimi (2001) suggests that the development of pragmatic competence of the target language entails the ability to use a wide range of conversational routines and discourse strategies to manage one's communicative interactions with others. Fung and Carter (2007) also call for the need to strengthen language learners' pragmatic competence in spoken language by creating opportunities to improve their use of DMs. This attention to DMs in the field of second language acquisition has triggered huge interest among researchers. Most

empirical studies have shown that there are major differences in the use of DMs between native speakers and nonnative speakers of English, which will be reviewed below.

Empirical Evidence

Native vs. Non-native Speakers

A great bulk of research has compared the use of DMs of learners of English (NNSs) from various language backgrounds to that of native speakers (NSs) as baselines for second language teaching and learning. DMs that are typically interactive and characteristic of spoken interaction have been mostly examined with regard to their use in informal conversations. For example, in a comparative study of conversations between native and Finnish speakers of English, Nikula (1996) describes differences between the two groups' uses of what she calls 'pragmatic force modifiers'. She suggests that non-native speakers tend toward a greater directness in their verbal performance, which often results from their failure to use pragmatic force modifiers in interpersonal terms. For example, expressions like *more or less, kind of, and stuff like that*, and *and everything* were used less often by nonnative speakers than by native speakers in her study. Not surprisingly, the non-native speakers' pragmatic success tended to be judged less favorably. Accordingly, this gives rise to the presumption that more proficient learners may be more likely to attend to the interpersonal domain of communication than less proficient learners.

Hasselgren (2002) studied the use of "smallwords" (such as *all right, okay* and *kind of*) of native English and non-native Norwegian teenagers in the data collected through a series of tasks such as description, narration, discussion, giving. The analysis

revealed a smaller use of such words in the non-native group in terms of both quantity and range. Hasselgren argues that this type of smallwords should be a part of one's language repertoire because it not only serves communicative functions but also enhances the learner's overall fluency. However, this study did not distinguish the use of these lexical devices in specific types of tasks. In addition, a drawback of this study is that decisions as to what counted as smallwords were made by the researcher herself who did not specify the criteria adopted.

Similar studies were also carried out by other scholars. Santana-Williamson (2005) compared the use of DMs of NNSs and NSs from a corpus of academic spoken American English. Quantitative analysis revealed that the NNSs barely used conversational hedges such as *kind of, sort of, well, you know*. Other researchers such as Fuller (2003a) and Muller (2005) also made such comparisons between the use of interactional markers between native speakers and nonnative speakers of English, both suggesting that non-native speakers tend to be characterized by "formulaic use of some DMs and an overall lower rate of DM occurrence" (Fuller, 2003a, p.187). These studies all point to the relevance of this type of DMs as part of interlanguage pragmatics to language teaching and learning. They serve to indicate that if people want to be more successful in learning the target language, they have to be able to use such interactional devices to be more alive to contextual needs.

Trillo (2002) goes beyond describing the NS vs. NNS differences. He attempts to give an explanation on the limited use of interactional DMs of NNSs. To this end, based on the analysis of two corpora of naturally-occurring conversations by native speakers and learners, he investigated the evolution of the use of pragmatic markers of native and

non-native children and adults. The quantitative analyses suggested that although the children in both groups demonstrated a similar pattern in DM use, there was an increase in "involvement markers" (e.g. *you know*, *you see*, *well*, which involve the listener in the thinking process of the speech) use as the NSs grew up whereas this type of device was not mastered by the non-native adults. Trillo explains that this was probably because involvement markers are connected with "the articulation of the argumentative process and the social and cognitive relationship between the speaker and the addressee" (p.782); lack of competence of such pragmatic aspects of the learned language may be a result of the non-natural teaching environment which does not provide adequate access to the pragmatic resources in their learning process. Trillo also suggests that the grammatical and pragmatic aspects of language in L2 have different rates of development; the latter, which is particularly required in casual conversation, is typically underdeveloped in non-native learners.

Trillo thereby proposes the term "pragmatic fossilization", defined as the phenomenon that a non-native speaker systematically fails to use certain forms of language in pragmatically appropriate ways. It is associated with pragmatic distance which refers to "the variants in the social, cognitive and contextual dimensions of linguistic communication that govern and systematize social relations in speech'' (p.771). Foreign language learners, according to Trillo (2002), follow a ''binary track'' in their linguistic development: the formal track, which relates to the grammatical and semantic rules, vs. the pragmatic track, which relates to the social use of language in different contexts and registers. Pragmatic fossilization occurs not as a result of lack of competence of the formal track, but due to a delay in exposure to the pragmatic track,

relative to the way communication competence is acquired in the mother tongue. Trillo's work indicates clearly that lexical terms that tie in with interactional coherence should be made an integral element in second language learning and teaching and opportunities should be created in the classroom for learners to use them in pragmatically appropriate ways. In addition, it can be inferred that more proficient L2 speakers may be pragmatically fossilized to a lesser degree and use more actively those DMs that indicate their involvement in the ongoing context than less proficient speakers.

Similar comparisons have also been made on DMs in terms of their contribution to the textual aspect of discourse coherence. For example, some studies compared the use of such DMs in presentations and lectures given by native-speaking international teaching assistants (ITAs) and non-native speaking teaching assistants (TAs) in the U.S. Tyler (1992) compared qualitatively the planned spoken text of a native speaker of Chinese from Taiwan who was an international teaching assistant (ITA) with that of a native speaker of U.S. English. The ITA was perceived by native speakers of English as difficult to follow, which was, as Tyler (1992) pointed out, possibly a result of unexpected and nonparallel use of discourse markers (e.g. *and, then, first*) that signal ideational relations. Tyler concludes that signalling of microlevel logical and prominence relations is important in terms of its contribution to comprehensibility. She emphasizes the need to train L2 speakers to use discourse structuring devices in a native like way. This was unsupported by Williams' (1992) study. Williams' comparison of the planned and unplanned topic-related presentations delivered by some native TAs and Korean- and Chinese- speaking ITAs' indicated that explicit cueing of macro discourse structures (e.g. Today *I want to spend a few minutes…, for example*) had a more immediate effect on the

comprehensibility of the presentations of the ITAs than those of the native speaking TAs. Williams therefore proposes that the ITAs, instead of simply targeting NS behavior, should develop their strategic competence to compensate for skills they do not have at their disposal or are hard to improve, e.g. pronunciation. This type of skill, not of any less importance than linguistic competence, is relatively easy to learn and should be incorporated into NNS instruction in order to counteract the communication problem NNSs might encounter. In spite of the discrepancy in their findings, the work of both Tyler (1992) and Williams (1992) implies that nonnative learners of the target language can improve the comprehensibility of their spoken discourse by paying more attention to discourse structuring cues. It can also be speculated here that such cues are important in the construction of extended transactional discourse.

The above studies only focused on DMs that function on either the interactional or ideational level. Hays' (1992) work with the classroom oral discourse by some Japanese learners of English studied seven DMs including both ideational and interactional markers. Only three students were found to be able to use *well*, while the great majority of students were able to use *and, but,* and *so* ideationally. Hays claims that ideational DMs are acquired earlier because they are overtly taught while markers on the interactional plane are delayed because there is not enough exposure to their use in the discourse community. This study makes us aware of a possible difference in the acquisition of the two different types of DMs by nonnative learners; more competent learners are expected to be better able to use interactional DMs. Nevertheless, like the majority of the studies reviewed above, it only analyzed a rather limited set of lexical terms.

In a more recent study, Fung and Carter (2007) adopted a multi-dimensional functionally-based framework which consists of interpersonal, referential, structural and cognitive categories of DMs. They made a comparison based on a pedagogic sub-corpus from a corpus of spoken British English, and a corpus of interactive classroom discourse of secondary pupils in Hong Kong. They found that although both groups of speakers used DMs as "interactional maneuvers" to organize speech on interpersonal, referential, structural and cognitive levels (p.414), Hong Kong learners displayed a liberal use of referentially functional DMs (*and, but, because, OK, so, etc.*), but a relatively restricted use of other markers (*yeah, really, say, sort of, I see, you see, well, right, actually, cos, you know, etc.*); native speakers were found to use DMs for much more varied purposes. This phenomenon gives rise to the speculation that more proficient students may be more capable of using DMs to attend to both the ideational and interactional aspects of discourse coherence. These findings lead Fung and Carter to the conclusion that DMs should be a learning objective for second language learners and should be encouraged to improve the skills to communicate more fluently and naturally, and to avoid misunderstanding in communication, so that learners can have "a sense of security in L2" (p.433). They also suggest that it is important to attend to both textual and interpersonal dimensions of coherence. On the other hand, although the authors specify in the general description of their native speaking and non-native speaking corpora a variety of speech acts and contexts, like Hasselgren (2002), they do not make such distinctions in their data analyses; in other words, they do not take into account the possibility that different task functions and contexts may have an effect on the DMs used.

Overall, the above studies provide us with enlightening insights into the relevance of DMs in second language learning. They suggest that nonnative learners of the target language tend to underuse DMs, particularly interactional markers. Nevertheless, their underlying assumption seems to be that native speakers are the source of norms for nonnative speakers, which has been questioned by a large body of studies (e.g. Hu, 2004; Kachru, 1990; Nelson, 1982; Quirk, 1985), which argue that English used by non-native speaking people should also be understood and respected in its own right. Some studies examined DM use among learners themselves in the effort to find out if proficiency level is a possible predictor of DMs use, which will be discussed in the following section.

DMs and Proficiency Level

Proficiency-based comparisons of ideational markers were mostly done with students' writing products. For example, Evensen's (1990) study on some EFL learners' writing also showed differences between learners of different proficiency levels. Its less proficient group tended to use more unmarked means, such as the local, multifunctional additive connector *and*, to link different parts of the text, while the more proficient students could relate textual structures in a clearer manner using other coherence devices. This study also suggested that the less proficient group clung to the chronological dimension as a primary structuring strategy in their written narratives, while more proficient students had other coherence devices at their command. A more recent study was conducted by Martinez (2004) who investigated the use of DMs by Spanish university students in the expository composition discussing the importance of a theory, because she noticed that Spanish students of English found it very difficult to construct

an organized and coherent text in English. She used Fraser's taxonomy of DMs to analyze what DMs were used by first-year English students in their writings in relation to students' writing proficiency. The results indicated a significant positive relationship between the scores of the compositions and the number of DMs used; also the essays with more elaborative (e.g. *and, also*), contrastive (e.g. *but, although*), and topic relating DMs (e.g. *with regards to, in relation to*) scored higher than those with fewer such DMs, among which elaborative markers were used most frequently and had stronger effect on the compositions' quality. Thus, Martinez concludes that the frequency of DM use is an indicator of students' writing skill in English; therefore, students should be encouraged to use DMs in order to improve their writing and focused lessons are necessary to explain the meaning and correct use of DMs in English. The work of both Evensen (1990) and Martinez (2004) suggests that there are indeed differences in the way DMs are used to organize ideas in written discourse by students at different proficiency levels. On the other hand, it is important to understand that since there are distinctive differences between written and spoken discourse according to what was reviewed above, it is reasonable to expect that features in spoken discourse that distinguish students' speaking proficiency may not be the same as those that are present in written discourse, particularly when considering that spoken discourse is typically not as well structured and there are lexical terms that are characteristically associated with spoken interaction.

Elhindi (1996) is one of the few studies comparing the use of DMs in spoken English across various proficiency levels. He analyzed the use of Schiffrin's (1987) seven DMs (i.e. *oh, well, now, then, you know, I mean, so, because, and, but, or*) in the interview data of his Arabic-speaking subjects and found that the occurrence of these

lexical terms per ten turns increased with proficiency. Also, more advanced speakers could use them to achieve a wider range of communicative goals including reorientation of information, coordination of ideas, marking contrasting claims, modifying previous response and marking noncompliance with a request. However, this study only investigated a very short list of DMs which were considered only when they occurred turn-initially. Besides, it did not compare the specific use of these DMs across proficiency levels.

A study that is particularly noteworthy is that by Hasselgren (2002). As we have reviewed earlier, this investigation revealed more use of DMs by native speakers than by nonnative speakers. In the same study, Hasselgren also compared the use of lexical terms such as *well*, *you know* (called "smallwords" in the study) by Norwegian learners of English differentiated by fluency levels measured according to pauses and length of utterance) to that of native speakers of the language. The more fluent students were found to be closer than the less fluent ones to native speakers of English in quantity and range of such expressions used. This study lends support to the assumption that more proficient learners are probably likely to use interactional DMs to a greater extent than those who are less proficient. Nevertheless, what is disputable of Hasselgren's study is whether it is appropriate to treat smallwords as contributory to speech fluency; in addition, to what extent fluency is relevant to proficiency is still open to debate.

Summary

This chapter reviews different frameworks and approaches employed in DM studies and explains their use in spoken interaction and discusses the relevance of DMs in

language learning. Existing work has contributed valuable perspectives to the field of DM regarding what DMs are and what functions they serve. Nevertheless, views on DMs abound and are far from unified. DM is still a fuzzy concept with no common and homogeneous definitions. As claimed by Aijmer (2004), "we are only beginning to define what we mean by discourse particles and to classify them into functional categories" (p.55). The complexity is that formal grammar is not capable of accounting for the meaning and function of DM which is not associated with its morphosyntactic features. No word class fits with the broad range of DMs.

Despite all the disagreement and difficulties in delineating a common category of DMs and different frameworks proposed and employed, there are several general agreements. One is that the major function of DMs is on the pragmatic level, not on the propositional level. DMs are largely non-propositional at the discourse level; their functions are normally not associated with their morphosyntactic features. DMs include linguistic items that "mark off one segment of the overall discourse with reference to some other segments" (Watts, 1998, p.242). One has to go beyond the content meaning of the utterance.

Another important general assumption is that DMs are multifunctional, which explains their enormous usefulness and frequent occurrences in discourse. A major function DMs serve, as discussed in a substantial amount of work in discourse analysis, is that they help create discourse coherence. On the one hand, DMs can hold various parts of the discourse together. On the other hand, they can be indexically used as contextual coordinates signifying various aspects of the interaction. Empirically, they aid the addressee in comprehending what is intended by the speaker. This flexibility makes it

possible for DM studies to formulate their own definitions, depending on what DMs are targeted and the specific purposes of the study.

A consensus is that DMs contribute significantly to the co-construction of meaning and understanding between interlocutors and help build coherence not only textually but also interactionally. As Fung and Carter (2007) summarize, "they signal transitions in the evolving process of the conversation, index the relation of an utterance to the preceding context and indicate an interactive relationship between speaker, hearer, and message" (p.411). In spoken discourse, which is distinguished from written discourse in language use, DMs are particularly valuable in managing interlocutors' participation in the interaction.

Most existing work on DMs revolves around DMs as tools contributing to coherence at either the textual or interpersonal level. So far, there is no single framework that incorporates such multifacetedness on the one hand and sets defining criteria for DMs on the other hand. It is tentatively proposed here, based on what was reviewed above, that by combining Fraser's (1999) taxonomy that can be used to recognize the DMs that are primarily functional on the ideational plane, and Stenström's inventory of lexical items used in spoken interaction that are largely interactional, we could at least identify in the first place those expressions that are typically associated with the two major levels of discourse coherence; it is hoped that this combination can serve as a relatively sound basis for more systematic examinations of how DMs relate to discourse management by tying the ongoing discourse not only to the linguistic context but also to that of their interlocutors.

In the field of second and foreign language acquisition, DMs are believed to be an intrinsic part of one's communicative competence and are closely related with effective communication. Therefore, it would be useful and meaningful to understand how DMs as an important linguistic parameter are used by learners of English as a foreign language. Relevant findings have provided abundant evidence that there tends to be an underuse of ideational and interactional DMs among nonnative learners of English as opposed to native speakers of the language, which indicates that learners need to be more sensitive to this aspect of language in their learning process. Although such a difference also seems to be true between more proficient learners and less proficient ones, research on non-native English per se is rather limited; also, most relevant studies concentrated on approaching the difference quantitatively. It is believed that specific ways DMs are used should also be looked into in order to obtain a more complete picture, and integrating quantitative and qualitative perspectives can contribute to more convincing and interesting findings.

In addition, previous work on DM use by nonnative speakers did not distinguish the use of DMs in different situations. Little is known about how speaking tasks and contexts can affect learner's DM performance. There is barely any information on how nonnative learners of English use DMs to connect ideas for different types of rhetorical tasks and to relate to different interactive contexts. Another underexplored area is the use of DMs in spoken discourse by English learners in China. Methodologically, most existing research that involved nonnative learners use of English in spoken discourse studied individual DMs, rather than treating DMs as a well-defined category functioning at both ideational and interactional levels. Since DMs and spoken language are both complex concepts, it is believed that a detailed, structured and functional description is

needed to generate an in-depth understanding of the use of the English language of the Chinese learners.

Such studies are particularly important in terms of their possible pedagogical implications. When planning speaking classes or speaking programs for second language learners, we are often faced with the need to define the goals of the program. The research reviewed in this chapter can lead us to the speculation that NNSs more competent with DMs of the target language are likely to be more effective in spoken interaction than those less competent ones, which is yet to be proved with more empirical evidence. It would also be useful to uncover what more advanced and skilled learners in second language acquisition tend to do in the production of spoken discourse. We assume that such work can yield useful insights with regard to the development of learners' communicative competence, and the features identified in more advanced speakers can possibly be encouraged in the classroom for learners to develop their capacity to communicate in the spoken form of the target language.

The following chapter will present the general research purposes and specific research questions addressed by this study. It will also introduce the instrument used for speech elicitation, analytical framework adopted, operationalization of task functions and contexts, as well as data collecting and processing procedures.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

General Research Purposes

The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of DMs in the spoken discourse of Chinese college learners of English in relation to their proficiency level. Specifically, the study attempted to identify DMs, analyze the relationship between the use of DMs and oral proficiency level, and find some patterns, if there are any, that characterize students' speaking with regard to the choice and use of DMs.

Elicitation Instrument

Specifically, this study compared DM use by intermediate and advanced speakers as measured by the ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) oral proficiency guidelines (Breiner-Sanders, Lowe, Miles, & Swender, 2000) in the Video Oral Communication Instrument (VOCI). As an alternative and technologically mediated modification to the Oral Proficiency Interview, the VOCI was first developed by the Language Acquisition Resource Center at San Diego State University.

Incorporating visual as well as audio input presented through an audiovisual tape, it uses technology rather than a face-to-face conversation to elicit speech samples ratable on the ACTFL scale by means of a variety of carefully constructed tasks (Kenyon, 1998). It is supposedly a more authentic test instrument than one that merely provides audio stimuli. This test provides various contexts or situations, following each of which a task is given to the candidate. The VOCI consists of a total of 23 tasks, broadly defined in four task levels, i.e. novice, intermediate, advanced and superior, and in terms of speech functions (such as “asking questions,” “giving a simple description,” “supporting an opinion”), discourse types, content, and contexts. It assesses four proficiency levels of candidates according to ACTFL guidelines: novice, intermediate, advanced and superior (see Appendix A).

The VOCI can be group-administered in a language lab. A master tape plays the test directions and the test taker responds to the video-stimulus. It has both a timed and untimed version. The timed version of this instrument used for this study shows some colored balls on the screen that decrease gradually in number, representing the time that remains. The test taker is supposed to finish before the disappearance of all balls. The candidates' responses are recorded for later scoring by raters. This instrument is approximately 60 minutes in length. It was digitized to be playable on computers for this study. In this study, proficiency levels were measured against the ACTFL guidelines through the VOCI. This decision was made on the following two considerations. On the one hand, candidates would be dealing with the same tasks in the same situation so that the comparison of their speech samples would be more reliable than those elicited by individually conducted interviews or naturally occurring conversation. On the other hand,

the instrument is a more authentic test instrument than one that merely provides audio stimuli, since candidates could see on the screen people talking to them.

Research Questions

In accordance with the general purposes specified earlier, the following questions were addressed in this study:

1. What ideational and interactional markers are used by intermediate and advanced students respectively?
2. Do advanced students use ideational and interactional markers more often than intermediate students?
3. Do advanced students use a greater variety of ideational and interactional markers than intermediate markers?
4. What types of ideational markers are used by intermediate and advanced students respectively?
5. Do advanced students use various types of ideational markers more frequently than intermediate students?
6. Is there a difference in the use of ideational markers with different task functions between intermediate and advanced students?
7. Is there a difference in the use of interactional markers in contexts of different interaction levels between intermediate and advanced students?

Question 1 and 4 were open-ended. Hypotheses were made associated with Question 2, 3, 5, 6, 7:

Hypothesis 1: Advanced students use ideational and interactional markers more often than intermediate students.

Hypothesis 2: Advanced speakers use greater varieties of ideational and interactional markers than intermediate speakers.

Hypothesis 3: Advanced students use various categories of ideational markers more frequently than intermediate students.

Hypothesis 4: There is a difference in the use of ideational markers for different task functions between intermediate and advanced students.

Hypothesis 5: There is a difference in the use of interactional markers in contexts of different interactive levels between intermediate and advanced students.

Analytic Models

As discussed in Chapter Two, there are no uniform and generally-acceptable models available for the interpretation and description of DMs. Researchers have adopted different approaches for their own purposes. As this study attempts to present a comprehensive account of the use of DMs in terms of both textual and interactive aspects of coherence, the adopted analytic framework consists of two parts: Fraser's (1999) taxonomy, which is message-based and includes linguistic devices contributing to textual coherence, and Stenström's (1994) inventory of the most often used lexical items in spoken discourse, which help construct interactional coherence.

Fraser's Taxonomy

The reason for choosing Fraser's taxonomy is that it defines DMs clearly as "lexical expressions which are syntactically independent of the basic sentence structure and have a general core meaning which signals the relationship of the current utterance to the core meaning" (Fraser, 1988, p.28). As Fraser (1990) explains, this approach contributes to a clear understanding of how interlocutors determine how to interpret a given DM in a given context. As we have seen in Chapter 2, her model helps clarify the function of DMs in context and equips us with a tool that can be used to recognize DMs.

The first group of Fraser's DMs is made up of three major subclasses: contrastive, elaborative and inferential markers. Contrastive markers signal that the message entailed in the second discourse segment contrasts with the message of the first segment. A second subclass of DMs consists of expressions called elaborative markers because they indicate that the message of the second discourse segment is parallel to the message of the prior segment. A third subclass, inferential markers, is composed of DMs which suggest that the second segment is to be taken as a conclusion based on the first segment. Fraser's second major category of DMs is made up of DMs that relate topics. The DMs that these categories include are provided in Figure 1.

Fraser (1999) also identifies some additional subclasses of DMs, which are relatively smaller in size. One group, unlike the inferential group which introduces a conclusion following the first discourse segment, refers to those expressions that introduce causes for ideas presented in the other discourse segment. In this group, Fraser lists:

Figure 1. *Fraser's Major Categories of DMs*

Contrastive markers	*but, however, (al)though, in contrast (with/to this/that), whereas, in comparison (with/to this/that), on the contrary, contrary to this/that, conversely, instead (of (doing) this/that), rather (than (doing) this/that), . on the other hand; despite (doing) this/that, in spite of (doing) this/that, nevertheless, nonetheless, still*
Elaborative markers	*And, above all, also, besides, better yet, for another thing, furthermore, in addition, moreover, more to the point, on top of it all, too, to cap it all off, what is more, I mean, in particular, namely, parenthetically, that is (to say), analogously, by the same token, correspondingly, equally, likewise, similarly, be that as it may, or, otherwise, that said, well*
Inferential Markers	*So, of course, accordingly, as a consequence, as a logical conclusion, as a result, because of this/that, consequently, for this/that reason, hence, it can be concluded that, therefore, thus, in this/that case, under these/those conditions, then, all things considered*
Topic Markers	*back to my original point, before I forget, by the way, incidentally, just to update you, on a different note, speaking of X, that reminds me, to change to topic, to return to my point, while I think of you, with regards to*

after all, because, for this/that reason, since

Fraser does not give this group a label. This study proposes to call these words and phrases causative markers.

While I agree with Fraser's way of defining DMs, her lists are by no means complete. For one thing, some linguistic devices (e.g. "*what's more*", "*to conclude*") which do not appear in her lists could have been included as they also signal a two-way relationship of discourse segments. In addition, some other expressions, though not a member of any of the major classes as identified by Fraser, are also DMs by Fraser's definition. For example, in one of her endnotes, Fraser briefly mentions that words such

as *after, before, while*, which specify the time of S2 relative to S1, are also DMs. But she does not go into detail. Thus, instead of identifying DMs strictly according to the major categories Fraser provides, this study also adopted a bottom-up corpus-driven method; in other words, it recognized DMs according to Fraser's definition first, and then categorizes them according to discourse functions.

As a result, it was found that most DMs identified in the data collected for this study according to Fraser's criteria corresponded to Fraser's main classes, although some were not present in her lists. For example, *first, firstly, second, secondly, third, thirdly, finally* were put into the category of elaborative markers. *As to, as far* were added to the realm of topic markers. The remaining DMs could be put into several groups: causative markers, such as *since* (as in *Since I were a teacher myself, I have a lot of stories like this to tell*), *as, for, unless*; temporal markers, such as *since* (as in *I've not seen my parents since I came to university*), *before, after, after that, before that, as, when*; conditional markers such as *as long as, if*. On the other hand, there is an obstacle in applying Fraser's notion of "discourse segment" into spoken data, since spoken discourse is not always made up of well-formed clauses; instead, it is often characterized by features such as false starts, back channel cues, repetitions and repairs. In this study, discourse segments were understood as the shortest utterance that can be punctuated as a sentence and convey a complete message. For example, in:

[3.1] *There are many cars, many tr-, and many cars and traffic jam in Beijing.*

<u>But</u> in Liaoyang, we, I, I will not worry about traffic jam.

Although [3.1] contains some repetitions and self-correction, it is treated as two discourse segments connected by a contrastive DM (i.e. *but*).

Based on such criteria, it should be noted that some lexical terms that can serve as DMs do not always count as DMs. They are syntactically inseparable from their hosting sentences. For example, in the following pairs of sentences, the first instance of the underlined word is not a DM; only the second instance of each pair serves as a DM (Note: all example sentences in this chapter were taken from the corpus of students participating in this pilot study, unless otherwise specified).

[3.2] a. *My hometown has some skyscrapers, but not as many as big cities.*

b. *We lost the game, but they behaved very brave.*

[3.3] a. *And we, we know each other from, from junior, junior high school, and we are, we have been very good friends since then.*

b. *I miss you very much. Um, it's a long time since we met last time.*

[3.4] a. *I just type them on computer and then printed them out.*

b. *I just spell the few words of them, and then the system will correct them automa-, automatically.*

[3.5] a. *I am very sorry that I not turn up in the dinner appointment, because I am very so busy with my business that I forgot the, the date with you.*

b. *I've decided to pursue my further education at another university, so I have a lot of, a lot of to prepare.*

[3.6] a. *I can find some informations there, and, um,also, also learn, learn much from it.*

b. *Living in big cities is not so good, and also there, there is a, there is the big environmental problem.*

But in [3.2a] indicates a contrastive meaning. However, *not as many as big cities* is not complete syntactically; nor does it convey a complete message on its own; therefore, it is not a discourse segment; therefore, *but* is not a DM either. *Since* in [3.3a] is a temporal preposition; *then* in [3.4a] is not followed by a complete discourse segment, although *printed them out* can be restored to *then I printed them out*; *so* in [3.5a] is an adverb modifying *busy*; *also* in [3.6a] does not precede a discourse segment. Therefore, none of them counted as DMs in this study. By contrast, the underlined words in [3.2b], [3.3b], [3.4b], [3.5b] and [3.6] are all DMs because they signal how two discourse segments relate to each other. Specifically, *but* in [3.2b] is a contrastive DM, indicating that the discourse segment it introduces contrasts with the one that precedes it; *since* in [3.3b] is a temporal DM, suggesting what follows marks the time starting from which *it's been a long time*; *then* in [3.4b] is a temporal DM, showing that the hosting discourse segment takes place after the prior one; and *so* in [3.5b] is an inferential DM, signaling that what follows is a consequence of the decision to go to another university; *also* [3.6b] is an elaborative marker, indicating that the fact that *there is the big environmental problem* augments the assertion that *living in big cities is not so good*. The primary function of these lexical devices is not to add the propositional content to their hosting sentences; rather, they signal how the sentences they introduce relate to the sentence before them. In short, only those linguistic devices that indicate the relationship between two discourse segments were considered DMs in this study and counted as ideational markers that relate to content-level coherence.

Stenström*'s Inventory*

The other model adopted in this study is Stenström's inventory of lexical items. As we have seen earlier, it is important to achieve coherence not only at the ideational level, but also at the interactional level. Content-level coherence is only one aspect of successful spoken communication. It is also necessary to be able to integrate the ongoing discourse with context. As accounted for by Stenström (1994), a discourse is coherent when "what the speakers say fits in and makes sense to the speakers in the actual context" (p.14).

Stenström's (1992) lexical items, as explained in Chapter 2, are those that are peculiar to spoken discourse and all have an interactional function. They are used frequently in native-speakers' spoken discourse to start, carry on, and terminate the conversation, or organize or hold the turn, mark boundaries in the discourse. Stenström (1994) provides an inventory which reflects the most common lexical items that are used for such purposes:

Figure 2. Stenström*'s Inventory of the Most Common Lexical Items*

actually	*I think*	*right*	*ah*	*mhm*	*sort of*	*all right*
no	*sure*	*anyway*	*now*	*question tag*	*God*	*oh*
That's right	*goodness*	*OK*	*yes/yeah*	*gosh*	*please*	*you know*
I mean	*quite*	*you see*	*I see*	*really*	*well*	

This inventory contains *I mean* and *well* which are also listed by Fraser as elaborative markers. Existing literature mostly considers these two devices to be closely related to interlocutors' situational roles. For example, Schiffrin (1987) claims that *I mean* has

broad interactional effects; it tells the listener to continue paying attention to prior material so as to understand how the speaker will modify it. *Well*, according to Schiffrin, shows that the speaker is attending to the need for coherence in spite of the incapability of the speaker to meet the need in ways fully compatible with the context set up by the prior discourse. Fuller (2003b) also argues that the use of *well* is closely geared to situational needs, such as utterance reformulation, face-mitigating, or delay of response. Stenström (1989) explicitly classifies these two expressions as primarily interactional. Therefore, to solve the overlap with Fraser's model, it is more reasonable to treat *I mean* and *well* as interactional markers.

Following Stenström (1990), all the items listed in Figure 2 serve as acts in communication, not parts of the propositional content. They only count when they function beyond sentence boundaries, such as when they marked transitions in discourse by serving as responses to the previous speakers' utterances, as *really* in [3.8], *OK* in [3.9a], and *right* in [3.10], or signaling the end of one's turn as OK in [3.12b].

[3.8] A: *He did it.*

B: *Really?*

A: *Yes, indeed* [Stenström, 1990]

[3.9]a. *OK, I have a lot of friends. I just choose, um,my boy friend to describe.*

b. *It is the most important thing for man to be a man. OK. Thanks.*

[3.10] A: *Would twelve o'clock be OK?*

B: *Right.* [Stenström, 1994]

The following instances of the same words are not DMs because none of them functions at the level of discourse.

[3.11] *We are <u>really</u> good friends, because we share the same value towards life.*

[3.12] *But if you use some newspapers or papers, it will be totally <u>OK</u>.*

[3.13] I *will try to helped him, no matter in daily life, or in, before the examination in a <u>right</u> way.*

These terms do not contribute to the understanding of a sequence of utterances that communicate a coherent message. Rather, they are used within the sentence boundary and contribute to the propositional meaning of the sentence. Specifically, *really* in [3.11] is merely an intensifier for the adjectives they modify. *OK* in [3.12] and *right* in [3.13] both carry propositional content.

Similarly, the following instances of *you know*, *now*, and *well* are DMs.

[3.14] *Hi, Coco. I am s-, terribly sorry to miss the date with you. <u>You know</u>, I am super busy with my study.*

[3.15] *<u>Now</u> all this happened last night.* [Stenström, 1990]

[3.16] A: *Tell us about it.*

B: *<u>Well</u>, lately, I had, I almost had a car accident.*

You know in [3.14] appeals to the hearer for common ground. *Now* in [3.15] marks a topic change. *Well* in [3.16] as a response to the question posed by A, as claimed by Schiffrin, is a marker of indirect answers which are ‘‘not fully consonant with prior coherence options’’ (1987, p103). In contrast, the following group of sentences are not DMs.

[3.17] *Um, <u>you know</u> my address?*

[3.18] *I’m living in Beijing <u>now</u>.*

[3.19] *It's very common to cheat in the examination. Why it's common because the students did not study very <u>well</u> in previous classes.*

You know in [3.17], *now* in [3.18], *well* in [3.19] in the utterances are part of the propositional content of the utterances that host them. They are linked with the rest of the utterances syntactically and semantically, not pragmatically. Therefore, they do not count as DMs.

The lexical terms included in Stenström's inventory function beyond the content level of their host utterances and contribute to various interactional purposes intended by the speaker, and were therefore called interactional markers in this study.

Data Processing

Each individual test was evaluated against the ACTFL guidelines by two independent raters: one certified ACTFL rater and a trained graduate student. Only those tests that received the same ratings from both raters were chosen for analysis.

The novice-level questions were disregarded because they were designed to only elicit short answers consisting of discrete sentences with infrequent DM use, and were considered irrelevant for the purpose of this study other than serving as warm-ups for participants. Therefore, this study only considered the intermediate, advanced and superior level questions (see Appendix B). In addition, in cases when it was obvious that the subjects were answering a wrong question (e.g. a student in the pilot study described the painting shown on the screen when he was supposed to argue whether it was art or not), or left certain tasks unanswered (e.g. a student in the main study replied that he couldn't understand the word *televise* in response to the task of discussing televising

criminal trials on TV), those questions were also disregarded to ensure the reliability of the comparison especially when considering that students' responses would be compared with regard to task functions and contexts. Only those tasks that were addressed by all participating students were examined.

The selected speech data were then transcribed fully by the researcher. The transcription symbols (see Appendix C) used for this study were adapted from Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn, Cumming, and Paolino (1993). Only those aspects of transcription relevant to this study were represented in the transcription. Pausing information was indicated because it provided important information distinguishing DMs from other sentence elements. Also some punctuation marks including periods and question marks were used to mark completed intonation units. Pseudonyms were used to conceal the identity of the participants. The transcripts were rechecked by another graduate student to ensure the accuracy of transcription.

DMs in the transcripts were then identified according to Fraser's taxonomy and Stenström's inventory. They were counted manually and double-checked via a computer search. Since the analysis was based on an occurrence count of DMs, it is necessary to clarify how DMs were counted. DMs were considered only as single occurrences when they were used repetitively, as in *I think* in [3.20] and *if* in [3.21].

[3.20] *Well, <u>I think, I think</u> if the city is too big, it's easy to lose your way.*

[3.21] *But <u>if, if</u> this is not permitted by the individuals themselves, you cannot do this kind of thing.*

Also in [3.22], *so* in [3.23] and *but* in [3.24] were also counted only once since they were intended to work only once as links between the discourse segment they introduced and

the prior segment. The segments where these DMs first appeared were abandoned, followed by an immediate repair that contained the same DM.

[3.22] *Beijing is <u>also</u>, I <u>also</u> like Beijing very much, because Beijing is very beautiful and is a modern city.*

[3.23] *And there are, there are a lot of competition between people. <u>So</u> I always feel, <u>so</u> people will, will fell very nervous, and, and bearing a lot of pressure.*

[3.24] *I'm sorry I missed the date. Um, <u>but</u> there's some, actually I was going to, to the date, <u>but</u> there was some emergency popped up.*

Also, instances such as *when* in [3.25], *and* in [3.26], and *if* in [3.27] were excluded because they were abandoned by the speakers who were trying to restructure their utterances. In [3.25], *when* was replaced by DMs *as*, while in [3.27] the attempt to introduce a conditional clause was canceled.

[3.25] *Um, I think <u>when,</u> <u>as</u> the, tech, techni, tech-, technology develop, develops, there are more, um, there are, more machines, such as computers, to, to be, to help us do lots of work.*

[3.26] *And <u>if</u>, and there are too much pollution in big cities due to too much people.*

In terms of word count used for frequency calculation, unfinished words were ignored, as *nor-* in [3.28], *coi-*, and *com-* in [3.29].

[3.28] *My hometown is located in the <u>nor-</u>, in the south of China.*

[3.29] *Every, every, every <u>coi-</u>, every coin has two sides, and <u>com-</u>, computer is*

also such a thing.

Based on the above criteria, instances of each ideational and interactional marker were recognized according to Fraser's definition and Stenström's inventory. They were then counted and added up. Frequencies of DMs were primarily examined in terms of the ratio of occurrences per 1000 words.

Operationalization of Task Functions and Contexts

Task Functions

In order to explore the relationship between task functions and the use of ideational markers in organizing spoken discourse in relation to proficiency levels, each of the VOCI tasks selected for the pilot study was identified in terms of the functions the test taker was supposed to perform. As a result, six functions were recognized to characterize the tasks: description, apology, narration, comparison, opinion and hypothesis.

Then one task was taken from the VOCI to represent each of the task functions. The specific considerations in task selection were as follows (see Appendix B for task details). There were three description tasks, i.e. Tasks 1, 2, and 3. Task 1 involved one's hometown, which overlapped to a certain extent with Task 5 which demanded a comparison between one's hometown and another city, while the context set up in Task 2 was not solely a description task, it also involved addressing and greeting a friend. Therefore, Task 3 was chosen as a description task. There was only one apology task (Task 4), one narration task (Task 7) and one hypothesis task (Task 12) respectively.

Task 8 was not considered for the examination on task functions either because it is a hybrid of various discourse functions. There were two comparison tasks, i.e. Task 5 and Task 16. Task 5 was chosen because it specified clearly the two things to be compared while Task 16 was too broad since it required candidates to compare the VOCI with other tests they'd taken; for Task 16, many participants mostly ended up focusing their discussion on the VOCI rather than fulfilling the function of making comparisons. There were six opinion tasks. Although Task 6 which required a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of city life was also a task asking for opinions, it turned out that the participating students repeated many things they already mentioned in their responses to Task 5 which was selected as a comparison task. Therefore, Task 6 was excluded. As for Task 9, a large part of the participating students of this study either did not argue whether what was shown was or was not art, or gave very short responses. Tasks 11 and 13 were not considered either because they were not very relevant to the Chinese context and therefore might not be able to elicit sufficient and appropriate output for the main study which was conducted in China. As a result, Task 10 was selected to represent the function of opinion. Specifically, all chosen tasks are provided in Figure 3 (see Appendix B for task details):

Figure 3. *Tasks Selected for Task Functions*

Narration: *Tell about a past experience* (Task 7)

Description: *Describe one of your friends* (Task 3)

Comparison: *Compare hometown with another city* (Task 5)

Opinion: *Discuss the dependence on modern machines* (Task 10)

Hypothesis: *How to deal with students' cheating* (Task 12)

Apology: *Apologize for missing a date* (Task 4)

It happened that all the above task functions and chosen tasks used for the pilot study were also applicable to the main study based on the criteria specified above. Therefore, the same tasks were also adopted for the primary study to operationalize task functions.

Task Contexts

The other type of DMs, i.e. interactional markers, was examined in terms of their use in response to the context set up by tasks. The majority of the VOCI tasks were interview questions asking for information. Students were supposed to provide answers to various questions. The tasks were raised in the form of either direct requests (e.g. *Tell us about your hometown*) or questions which include one yes/no question (i.e. *Can you compare your hometown with a city that you visited or you know well?*) and a variety of wh-questions (e.g. *How might your life look ten years from now?*). Since it turned out that these tasks were all treated similarly as requests for information by students and there was no distinct difference in the way students reacted to these tasks, they were all considered as one type of context, i.e. interview instruction. Except for the overall simulated interview setting, these tasks were inherently transactional in that the only requirement was for students to transmit topic-related information.

There were three tasks on the VOCI that required simulated interactions, i.e. Tasks 2, 4 and 9. Task 9, which asked students to convince people to buy books from them, was disregarded because it was either unanswered or misunderstood by some students in both the pilot study and the main study. Task 2 required students to send a cassette message to a friend at home describing where they were living and what they'd

been doing recently; it was considered semi-interactive because it involved keeping contact with a friend on the one hand and the function of description on the other hand. Task 4 asked students to apologize for missing a date, which was treated as interactive since it was mostly about fulfilling a social function. As a result, interactional markers were examined in terms of their use in response to three types of contexts: interview instruction (Tasks 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15), recorded message (Task 2) and apology (Task 4). These three types of contexts varied in terms of the level of interaction simulated: interview instruction was the least interactive, apology was the most interactive and cassette message was in the middle.

The Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted as an initial attempt to test the research questions and check the feasibility of the research design before launching the main study. Five native speakers of Chinese volunteered to participate in the pilot study. They were studying at a large comprehensive American university in the Midwest. They were three male and two female graduate students from the fields of education (n=2), food science, chemistry and economics respectively.

Consent forms were given to the participants for them to sign. A brief explanation of the test and the recording instructions were provided. The VOCI was played on the computer; the participants' responses were recorded onto a tape using a manually-operated recorder placed next to the computer. The participants were left alone in the room while taking the test to avoid distraction.

Two students were found to be at the advanced level, and three were at the intermediate level. One intermediate student was abandoned because he either misunderstood or did not answer a greater number of questions compared to the other two intermediate students; this would ensure the largest possible number of tasks that could be used for comparisons and analyses; another advantage was that there would be an equal sample size for both intermediate and advanced proficiencies. After taking out those questions that were unanswered or misunderstood, the responses to 14 tasks remained (i.e. Tasks 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15) and were transcribed for analysis, resulting in speech data totaling 6722 words. Ideational and interactional markers used by the four students are provided in Table 1.

Table 3.1. *Summary of DMs Used in the Pilot Study*

Student	**Ideational Marker**		**Interactional Marker**	**Occurrence**
	Category	**Occurrence**		
I-1	elaborative	and (9), secondly(2), thirdly(2), also(1), firstly (1), for example (1)	I think I mean you know actually	3 1 1 1
	contrastive	on the other hand (2), although (1)		
	inferential	so (31)		
	temporal	when(4), until(1), after that (3)		
	causative	because(13)		
	conditional	if (4)		
	Total	**75**	**Total**	**6**
	Ratio (‰)	**0.50**		**0.03**
I-2	elaborative	and (27), also(7), in the meantime (1), at the same time (1), first (1)	I think you know please OK actually No	2 1 1 1 1 1
	contrastive	But (8), although (1), even if (1)		
	inferential	so (8)		
	temporal	when (7), after that (2), as, since(1)		

	causative	because (7), since (2)		
	conditional	if (5)		
	Total	**79**	**Total**	**7**
	Ratio (‰)	**0.57**		**0.05**
A-1	elaborative	and(51), at the same time (1), first (1)	you know I think	16 7
	contrastive	but(9), although(4), on the other hand(2)	I mean well	2 1
	inferential	so(24), of course (1)	you see	1
	temporal	whenever(1)		
	causative	since (1), because (1), because of this (1)		
	Total	**97**	**Total**	**27**
	Ratio (‰)	**0.59**		**0.17**
A-2	elaborative	and(52), also(10), or(2), too, for example(1)	you know well	50 6
	contrastive	but(20), even though(6), instead(1), whereas(2), still (1), however (1), rather(1), yet(1), still(1)	I think actually OK I mean you know	5 2 1 1 1
	inferential	because(10)	yes	1
	temporal	if(2), as long as(1)	yeah	1
	causative	since(1), after(1), until(1),		
	Inferential	overall(1)		
	Total	**116**	**Total**	**68**
	Ratio (‰)	**0.68**		**0.32**

Note: I = Intermediate A = Advanced
Numbers next to DMs represent their occurrences.

Analyses of the spoken performance of the four students yielded some interesting findings. Apparent similarities existed between the two intermediate and two advanced students in the overall choice of ideational and interactional markers. Also, elaborative markers were used more often than other types of ideational markers for students at both proficiency levels. However, it was not clear from this small corpus whether there were variety differences in interactional marker and whether proficiency was an indicator of

students' preferences for categories of ideational markers. With regard to overall use, the difference in frequency of ideational markers between the two levels of proficiency was not as great as that of interactional markers. It was not obvious whether variety could discriminate the two proficiency levels. On the other hand, apparent discrepancies also existed between the intermediate and advanced participants. Both advanced students used interactional markers more frequently than intermediate students. With regard to task functions, advanced students seemed to use ideational markers to mark various levels of discourse structure more effectively than intermediate students. As for task contexts, advanced students were able to use interactional markers more frequently than intermediate students although they shared the use of some context-specific interactional markers.

The pilot study yielded some valuable information regarding the research questions presented at the beginning of this chapter. In addition to the results discussed above, it is also worth mentioning that the VOCI did create a context that elicited use of interactional markers although it provided no real interlocutors. Therefore, this pilot study provided sound justification for the feasibility of the research questions and the use of the VOCI as an instrument for speech elicitation and encouraged the researcher to conduct a more thorough and larger-scale investigation that could hopefully generate more definitive answers to the questions examined in this study.

The Main Study

Participants

The subjects were drawn from a major Chinese university. They comprised 50 undergraduate students from the field of English. The choice of major was made based on the researcher's years' of intuitive observation that Chinese college learners of English are relatively weak in English speaking. It would be rather difficult to gather the desired number of advanced-level English speakers from fields other than English to warrant statistical comparisons. In other words, selecting those majoring in English entailed a better chance to get more advanced-level speakers. Also, it could control the effect of academic background on language use.

The subjects consisted of 15 sophomores, 31 juniors, 2 seniors, and 2 first-year graduate students. There was only one male student. Their ages ranged from 20 to 22, with an average of 20.85 at the time of data collection. Their mean years of English learning were 9.9.

Data Collection and Processing

A copy of the digitized VOCI, and a consent statement with the researcher's signature were mailed to a personal friend of the researcher who was teaching in the English Department of the Chinese university. She explained briefly this project to her sophomore and junior classes. Forty six students showed interest in the study. Two senior students and two graduate students who had previously been taught by the researcher's friend also volunteered to take part in the study.

The participants were assigned to two language labs simultaneously; the purpose was to prevent any possible leak of the VOCI information to ensure the reliability of the test. The consent statement was read out to the students first. After that, the VOCI was administered. A master disc played the test directions; the candidates' responses were recorded in MP3format and then written onto a CD for later scoring by raters. Before the students left, a pencil case was given to each participant as a reward for their participation. The disc containing the speech performances of the participants was then mailed to the researcher.

Each individual test was assessed independently against the ACTFL guidelines by the two raters. Three students were excluded because one quit in the middle of the test and there was too much static in the recordings of the other two students. The raters disagreed on only three VOCIs. The VOCIs considered for analyses were only those whose ratings were agreed upon by both raters, which resulted in thirty-four intermediate students and ten advanced students. Ten were selected randomly from the intermediate

Table 3.2 *Labels and Years of School of Students*

Intermediate Students		Advanced Students	
Student	Year of School	Student	Year of School
I-1	sophomore	A-1	junior
I-2	junior	A-2	junior
I-3	sophomore	A-3	junior
I-4	junior	A-4	junior
I-5	sophomore	A-5	sophomore
I-6	sophomore	A-6	junior
I-7	sophomore	A-7	junior
I-8	graduate student	A-8	sophomore
I-9	sophomore	A-9	junior
I-10	sophomore	A-10	sophomore

Note: I=intermediate; A=advanced

speakers to equate the intermediate students to the advanced students in number. As a result, the speech samples of twenty female students were analyzed for this study, including ten advanced and ten intermediate students. The labels of students used for later analyses and their years of school are provided in Table 3.2.

The speech data of the chosen subjects were then transcribed. As in the pilot study, the analyses disregarded the novice tasks and those that were misunderstood or left unanswered. It turned out that 12 questions (i.e. Tasks 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,12,15) remained for analysis. The data were then transcribed, resulting in a total of 25448 words, and analyzed according to the criteria specified earlier in this chapter.

Statistical Procedures

The DM data were coded for statistical analyses to address the research questions. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 16.0) was used to analyze the data. In addition to descriptive statistics, Mann-Whitney *U* tests were computed to compare the occurrence ratio per 1000 words and variety of ideational and interactional markers used by students at the intermediate and advanced levels in terms of the research questions presented at the beginning of this chapter.

Summary

This chapter presented the specific research questions addressed by this study. It explained the analytic models adopted to classify DMs in the collected corpus, i.e. Fraser's (1999) taxonomy of DMs and Stenström's inventory of lexical items prevalent in spoken discourse. It also introduced the instruments used for data collection and data

processing procedures. Then it presented briefly the results of the pilot study. This chapter also described how subjects were drawn for the main study. Lastly, it outlined the steps taken to select data and the statistical treatment of the data.

The following two chapters (i.e. Chapters Four and Five) will report the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data regarding the use of ideational and interactional markers respectively.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS OF IDEATIONAL MARKERS

This chapter will report the results of analyses regarding the research questions related to ideational markers raised in the previous chapter. It will compare the overall occurrences and varieties of ideational and interactional markers in the speech data of intermediate and advanced students and then present the analysis of ideational marker use across various task functions, in relation to students' proficiency levels.

Overall Use of Ideational Markers

This study first looked into the overall occurrences of ideational markers in the corpus by proficiency level. Evident similarities existed in the choice of ideational markers. Table 4.1 summarizes the ideational markers that occurred five times and above in descending order in the responses of intermediate and advanced students respectively. It shows the total occurrences of these markers as well as their occurrences per 1000 words (represented by ‰ in the table). Although there were more occurrences (n=943) of ideational markers in the advanced group than in the intermediate group (n=812), the ratio of occurrences per 1000 words of intermediate students (ratio=.591) was only slightly higher than that of advanced students (ratio=.573). This table also indicates that

there were more types of such ideational markers in the responses of advanced students (type=18) than in those of intermediate students (type=15). However, advanced and intermediate students showed a similar pattern of ideational marker use in that the top four ideational markers were *and*, *but*, *also*, and *so*, in exactly the same order for both proficiency groups. Moreover, these ideational markers outnumbered the other ideational markers considerably in the speech of both intermediate and advanced students.

Table 4.1. *Ideational Markers that Occurred Five Times and Above by Proficiency Level*

Intermediate Students			**Advanced Students**		
Ideational Marker	**Number of Occurrences**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Ideational Marker**	**Number of Occurrences**	**Ratio (‰)**
and	363	0.283	and	396	0.252
but	91	0.071	but	122	0.078
also	53	0.041	also	79	0.050
so	45	0.035	so	74	0.047
when	29	0.022	because	43	0.027
if	26	0.020	if	29	0.018
because	19	0.015	when	24	0.015
first	18	0.014	for	12	0.008
for	14	0.011	or	10	0.006
for example	10	0.008	for example	9	0.006
if	8	0.006	although	8	0.005
then (temporal)	7	0.005	firstly	8	0.005
although	6	0.005	first	8	0.005
while	5	0.004	then (temporal)	8	0.005
secondly	5	0.004	of course	6	0.004
			while	6	0.004
			secondly	5	0.003
			still	5	0.003
Total of all ideational markers	**812**	**0.591**	**Total of all ideational markers**	**943**	**0.573**

The ratio of ideational marker occurrences per 1000 words was compared between intermediate and advanced students. The ratio median of intermediate students

(median=0.65, range=32) was the same as that of advanced students (median=0.65, range=.65). A Mann-Whitney *U* test was then conducted to compare the ratio of ideational markers between intermediate and advanced students. The test did not show a significant difference, z=-.113, p>.05. Therefore, advanced students did not use ideational markers more often than intermediate students as hypothesized previously.

Table 4.2. *Distribution of Students who were in the Higher Half in Ideational Marker Frequency in Descending Order*

Stud.	**Ideational Marker**	
	Ratio(‰)	**Proficiency**
A-9	.86	advanced
I-9	.78	intermediate
A-7	.74	advanced
I-5	.73	intermediate
A-3	.71	advanced
I-8	.69	intermediate
I-4	.67	intermediate
A-10	.66	advanced
A-8	.66	advanced
I-1	.65	intermediate

Table 4.2, which provides the distribution of students who were in the higher half in ideational marker occurrence ratio, i.e. students whose ratios of ideational and interactional markers per 1000 words were higher than the ratio median of ideational markers (median= 0.64) of all selected participants, further proves the lack of difference in ideational marker frequency between the intermediate and advanced students. It shows an even distribution of such students: five of the ten students were at the intermediate level and the other five were at the advanced level.

In short, intermediate and advanced students showed similar patterns in the use of ideational markers in that they used certain ideational markers more often than others. This was consistent with the lack of significant statistical differences in the ratio of

ideational markers and the even distribution of the higher half of students in occurrence ratio.

Variety of Ideational Markers

In regard to overall ideational marker variety, the median variety of ideational markers of intermediate students (median=14, range=9) was only slightly lower than that of advanced students (median=14.5, range=10). In order to examine whether advanced students used a greater variety of ideational markers than intermediate students, a Mann-Whitney *U* test was computed to compare the number of ideational marker types between intermediate and advanced students. The result was insignificant, $z = -.49$, $p > .05$, which indicated that more proficient students overall did not use more types of ideational markers than less proficient students, which was inconsistent with the previous assumption that more advanced speakers would overall use a greater variety of ideational markers to create textual coherence in speaking.

Table 4.3. *Types and Tokens of Ideational Markers Used by Intermediate and Advanced Students*

Intermediate Students			**Advanced Students**		
Student	**Type**	**Token**	**Student**	**Type**	**Token**
I-1	**19**	98	A-4	**20**	104
I-3	**19**	66	A-7	**17**	85
I-4	**16**	109	A-5	**17**	80
I-8	**15**	104	A-3	**16**	109
I-2	**15**	101	A-8	**15**	108
I-9	13	111	A-6	14	82
I-10	12	53	A-9	13	90
I-5	11	72	A-1	12	153
I-7	11	52	A-10	12	103
I-6	10	46	A-2	10	94

In order to show individual variations of ideational marker use by intermediate and advanced students, Table 4.3 provides the types and tokens of ideational markers used by each participating student. The type range was very close between intermediate and advanced students; the former had a range from 10 to 19, and the latter from 10 to 20. Students whose number of types was higher than the overall median of 14.5 (see Table 4.3 for highlighted cases) evenly distributed across the intermediate and advanced levels; i.e., they were made up of five intermediate students and five advanced students. In general, there were rather similar individual variations across the intermediate level and advanced level. In other words, there was not a clear tendency as to which proficiency level was associated with a greater variety of ideational markers.

The above statistical results and analyses of individual variation suggest that variety of ideational markers does not necessarily increase with one's proficiency level. There was no clear indication as to whether a greater variety of ideational markers was predictive of higher speaking proficiency. The above examination of ideational marker variety only gave us an overall view of the level of connectivity of students' oral discourse. It would be interesting to look into ideational markers in greater detail from the perspective of the kinds of relations that were marked, i.e. what types of ideational markers were used to provide transitions between ideas. Therefore, in additional effort to investigate ideational marker variety, this study also compared the specific categories of ideational markers determined by the type of connection they established between utterances as specified in Chapter Three between intermediate and advanced students, which will be reported in the following section.

Categorization of Ideational Markers

Ideational markers used by participating students were classified into different categories. In addition to the major classes proposed by Fraser's taxonomy (i.e. elaborative, contrastive, inferential, and topic markers), three more categories were identified: temporal, causal, conditional markers. A common trend of all participants, regardless of their proficiency levels was that elaborative markers constituted the highest proportion of all ideational markers for all the participants, followed by contrastive markers. The other markers scattered over the categories of inferential, temporal, causative and topic markers.

Table 4.4 is a summary of the number of occurrences of ideational markers (represented by #) and the occurrence percentage of each category in proportion to all ideational marker occurrences (represented by %) by proficiency level. What was especially interesting was that the percentage ranks of the seven categories were exactly the same for both proficiency groups: elaborative markers accounted for the biggest portion for both proficiency levels, followed by contrastive markers, inferential markers, causative markers, temporal markers, conditional markers and topic markers. The phenomenon that topic markers were rarely used probably related to the interview context where topics were nominated. Overall, intermediate and advanced speakers did not show any distinct differences in their choice of ideational markers. Rather, they both were likely to count more on certain types of connectives than others.

Table 4.4. *Category Distribution of Ideational Markers by Proficiency Level*

	Total	Elaborative		Contrastive		Inferential		Temporal		Causative		Conditional		Topic	
		#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
I	812	462	56.90	11.3	13.92	73	8.99	58	7.14	69	8.50	33	4.06	4	0.49
A	943	573	60.76	15.0	15.91	83	8.80	44	4.67	59	6.26	33	3.50	2	0.21

Note: I = Intermediate A= Advanced

Mann-Whitney *U* tests were run to compare the ratios (occurrences per 1000 words) of elaborative, contrastive, inferential, temporal, causative, conditional and topic markers respectively between intermediate and advanced students (see Table 4.5). Although intermediate students had a median either higher (i.e. elaborative, inferential, temporal, causative and conditional markers) than or equal (i.e. contrastive and topic markers) to that of advanced students, the test result was only significant for temporal markers, z=-2.01, p<.05. The median of intermediate students (median=.05, range=.11) was higher than that of advanced students (median=.03, range=.05). This suggested that intermediate students overall used temporal markers more often than advanced students.

Table 4.5. *Comparisons of Ideational Marker Categories between Intermediate and Advanced Students*

Category	Level	Median (‰)	Range (‰)	*z*	Significance
Elaborative	Intermediate	.35	.37	-.08	n.s.
	Advanced	.33	.28		
Contrastive	Intermediate	.09	.13	-.19	n.s.
	Advanced	.09	.08		
Inferential	Intermediate	.06	.08	-.08	n.s.
	Advanced	.05	.09		
Temporal	Intermediate	.05	.11	-2.01	*.04
	Advanced	.03	.05		
Causative	Intermediate	.05	.08	-.88	n.s.
	Advanced	.04	.13		
Conditional	Intermediate	.03	.02	-.90	n.s.
	Advanced	.02	.05		
Topic	Intermediate	.00	.03	-.49	n.s.
	Advanced	.00	.02		

* p<.05

To illustrate the heavier use of temporal markers of intermediate students relative to advanced students, the following two complete responses given by intermediate student I-8 and advanced student A-4, who were closest to the occurrence ratio median of their respective proficiency group, are provided below.

Intermediate Student

[4.1] *Nowadays, wi-, with the development of computer and other high-developed technologies, we refer to them more and more. Me, for example, since I had computer, I have never read the articles in papers. I just type them on computer and then printed them out. I think that, in this way, I'd, I even don't know how to spell a word, especially for some difficult words. I just, for, when I read on the computer, I ju-, I just spell the few words of them, and then the system will correct them automa-, automatically. So when I want to use it aurally, I don't know how to say it. This is the disadvantage of technology. I think that people should use them with care, not just refer to computer, uh, or some other machines.* [Student I-8]

Advanced Student

[4.2] *I think, dependence. I think the modern machines can bring, definitely can bring conve-, convenience to human beings. For instance, now the Internet, I am always, I almost check my email everyday. I almost go online everyday to find information and to communicate with our friends far away through email. But what may happen if I suddenly one day I*

cannot, I cannot go online and I lose all my contacts with my friends? So it made us, it makes us more dependent on it. Um, so I think the most viable solution is to see this modern technology on two, um, um, critically. On one hand, it will bring us convenience; but on the other hand it, we must, we must be cautions, we must be aware of its shortage, or its harm. Yes, we cannot too, go too dependent on modern technology. [Student A-4]

Students I-8 and A-4 were talking about the benefits and consequences of using computers. In [4.1], there were altogether four instances of three temporal words out of six ideational markers. Student I-8 used *since* and *when* to mark specific time and *then* to introduce the utterance that hosted it as subsequence of the foregoing *I just spell the few words of them. Since* was considered temporal, not conditional, because it could be reasonably considered as specifying a starting point for the experience expressed by present perfect form of the verb *read* and the unspecific *never*. In addition, although *then* and the two instances of *when* connected two utterances that were logically conditional, such a categorization was still derived from the original temporal relations; therefore, these two words were also viewed as temporal markers. Intermediate student I-8 developed her argument by presenting a series of situations defined by the parameter of time. By contrast, in [4.2], advanced student A-4 did not use any temporal markers in her discussion of the designated topic of computer. She built her discussion on a number of different logic relations, including elaboration (signaled by *for instance*), inference (signaled by *so*), condition (signaled by *if*) and contrast (signaled by *but, on one hand ... on the other hand*).

To sum up, there were both similarities and differences in the way various categories of ideational markers were used by intermediate and advanced students. Both groups tended to use elaborative and contrastive markers most often and conditional and topic markers least often. However, intermediate students overall exceeded advanced students in temporal marker use. More detailed comparisons will be made in the following section which will discuss how ideational markers were used by intermediate and advanced students for the six different types of tasks (i.e. narration, description, comparison, opinion, hypothesis, and apology) specified in the prior chapter.

Task Functions

For each of the six task functions, I will first report the results of Mann-Whitney *U* tests conducted to compare the occurrence ratio per 1000 words and the variety of ideational markers between intermediate and advanced students. I will then discuss the overall use of ideational markers by proficiency level. After that, the specific types and tokens of ideational markers will be provided in tables in descending order of individual occurrence ratio and discussed.

Narration

This task required students to tell about an unforgettable past experience (see Task 7 in Appendix B). Temporal markers were expected to be seen in students' responses since narrating a past experience probably involves confining the account into a time frame.

Overall Use

Intermediate students (median=0.63, range=1.04) were higher than advanced students (median= 0.54, range=.67) both in median and range of frequency ratio of ideational markers. However, the Mann-Whitney *U* test on occurrence ratio was not significant, z=-.79, p>.05, which indicated intermediate and advanced students did not differ significantly in ideational marker frequency. With regard to variety, intermediate students had a higher median (median=4, range=3) than advanced students (median=2.5, range=4). Again, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was insignificant, z=-1.25, p>.05. Therefore, overall there was not a significant discrepancy between intermediate and advanced students in ideational marker variety.

Table 4.6. *Summary of Ideational Markers by Proficiency Level for Narration*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.64	979 words	13: and(21), but (8), when (8), so (5), because (5), also (4), at last (3), then (2), although (2), of course (1), after (2), before that (1), though (1)	63
Advanced	0.51	1164 words	13: and (31), but (11), when (6), so (5), also (3), because (3), then (1), later (1), at last (1), finally (1), still (1), for (1), although (1)	59

Note: numbers in parenthesis to the right of markers represent the number of occurrences of each marker.

Table 4.6 summarizes the ideational marker use by proficiency level. The intermediate group (ratio = 0.64, token=63) had a higher ratio and more occurrences of ideational markers than the advanced group (ratio = 0.51, token=59). These two groups had the same number of types (type=13) of ideational markers. However, the advanced

group overall had longer narratives (length= 1164 words) than the intermediate group (length = 979 words). This table also indicates much use of temporal markers in both the intermediate and advanced groups. For the intermediate group, five among the thirteen types (i.e. *when, at last, then, after, before that*) were temporal markers with a total of 16 tokens; for the advanced group, five among the thirteen types (*when, then, later, at last, finally*) were temporal markers, with 10 tokens. This was consistent with the prior expectation about the use of temporal indicators. As Table 4.7 shows, this task elicited the second greatest proportion of temporal markers in all occurrences of temporal markers for the intermediate group and the greatest proportion for the advanced group. Temporal markers were used differently for the hypothesis task, which will be discussed in a later section.

Table 4.7. *Use of Temporal Markers by Proficiency Level across Tasks*

		Narration	**Description**	**Comparison**	**Opinion**	**Hypothesis**	**Apology**
I	Token	16	8	0	4	14	1
	Proportion	**0.25**	0.10	0	0.04	0.34	0.03
A	Token	10	10	2	3	6	3
	Proportion	**0.17**	0.13	0.02	0.04	0.13	0.07

Note: Ratio represents tokens of inferential and causative markers divided by tokens of all ideational markers.

Table 4.8. *Ideational Markers Used by Individual Students for Narration*

Intermediate				**Advanced**			
Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-8	1.41	5: when(1) and(1) also(2) so(1) but(1)	6	**A-4**	0.98	9: because(2) and(2) also(1) so(1) but(1) then (1) later(1) at last(1) finally(1)	12

I-5	1.30	6: and(4) also(1) but(1) although(1) of course (1) at last (1)	9	**A-3**	0.79	5: but(4) and(2) so(1) when(1) at last(1)	
I-3	0.72	6: when(2) and(1) after (2) but(1) so (1)	7	**A-2**	0.71	5: and(5) but(1) still (1) for(1) so(1)	9
I-2	0.72	4: and(3) but(2) because (2) also(1)	8	**A-10**	0.74	4: and(7) but(1) also(1) when(1)	10
I-1	0.68	6: and(4) so(1) when(1) then (1) because(1) before (1)	9	**A-8**	0.65	3: and(5) but(1) because(1)	7
I-7	0.58	4: and(1) when(1) although(1) but(1)	4	**A-1**	0.53	5: and(4) but(2) although(1) also(1) when(1)	9
I-4	0.54	4: and(3) so(1) because(1) at last(1)	6	**A-6**	0.44	3: and(3) so(1) when(1)	5
I-6	0.53	3: when(2) but(1) because(1)	4	**A-9**	0.41	2: and(2) but(1)	3
I-9	0.52	4: and(3) when(1) but(1) at last (1)	6	**A-7**	0.24	2: so(1) when(1)	2
I-10	0.37	4: and(1) so(1) though(1) then(1)	4	**A-5**	0.18	2: and(1) when(1)	2

Note: Stu.=Student

Individual Variation

The feature of frequent temporal marker use could also be seen in their wide distribution among individual students at both proficiency levels (see Table 4.8). Temporal markers occurred in the responses of most intermediate (n=9) and advanced students (n=7). *When* occurred in narrations of six intermediate students and six advanced students respectively to specify the time of experiences. The following excerpts of narratives are provided as examples.

Intermediate students

[4.3] *Um, I should say I have some impressived, impressive moment. When I study at high school, just near the college entrance exam, one of my classmate just, one day my classmate just fall, fall on the ground suddenly.* (Student I-3)

[4.4] *When I was in high school, my best friend and my boy friend betrayed me.* (Student I-8)

Advanced Students

[4.5] *When I was in the second year of my junior middle school, I had the chance to go to Japan as a student representative to attend a environmental meeting in Takasaki, a friendly city of my hometown Chengde.* (Student A-5).

[4.6] *Well, at the, until now my most unforgetting experience is um, in Taiwan, when I visited Taiwan last winter.* (Student A-6)

All the above excerpts were the beginning part of narrations. The use of *when* indexed the temporal setting when the narrated experience took place.

In spite of the common use of *when*, there were higher instances of other temporal markers than *when* in the narratives of intermediate students than advanced students. Specifically, eight intermediate students used five different types (i.e. *at last, then, after, before*) eight times altogether, while only two advanced students used *then, later, at last, finally* with a total of five occurrences. The following two excerpts of narratives are provided to illustrate the frequent use of temporal markers by intermediate students.

Intermediate Students

[4.7] *Um, when I think of this topic. The first thing occurred into my mind was when I was, I guess, I think ten years old. That was, that thing happened in a class. The teacher, was left, left for some reasons. So students in the classes are not quiet any more. They began to play with each other. And after the teacher came back, he ask, he asked who had been play, had been playing with each other, and not doing, not, but not do exercises. I said no. But after that, he found that I am one—* [Student I-3]

[4.8] *Um, yeah, I have, have one good experience in Beidaihe. And in my first, ever before my life, I, I've never seen the sea, and so in this, in last years' National Day, I and my boy friend went to the Beidaihe, to see the sea. When, I see the sea at first, at first sight, I was totally shocked by it; it's so big; I can never see the end of it, and terrific, fantastic, and then because before that, I've never been, been swim, swimming in the water, in, in the*

sea, or even in the water, I rented some, the cir-, swimming circle, and I, I, I went to swim in the sea. [Student I-1]

In [4.7] and [4.8], after specifying the time when the experience happened, intermediate students I-3 and I-1 used *after,*and *then* and *before* respectively to signal time sequences. Such words were indexical of temporal relations within the time frame of the narrated episode by pointing back to a prior utterance. Use of these temporal pointers resulted in linear accounts of episodes.

Comparatively speaking, advanced students tended to structure their narratives differently in ways that were less chronological. Two complete narrations from the advanced group are provided below as examples to illustrate this distinction. The first was by advanced student A-8 who was right above the occurrence ratio median of 0.59 in occurrence ratio of the advanced group, and the second was by student A-6 who was just below the type median of 3 of the advanced group.

Advanced Students

[4.9] *Um, well, I think, this, this morning I went to a publication house, and I kind of applied for a part-time job on the Internet. It's the translation of a book, from English to Chinese. And I met the man who has been sending emails to me. And he gave me a book, that, that, which is about the leadership skills. And this is the first time I ever had a face to face interview with anyone. But he did not ask me too much questions. Just, he just let me go through the books and talked casually. I think it's quite unforgettable, because it's the first time.* [Student A-8]

[4.10] *Well, at the, until now my most unforgetting experience is um, in Taiwan, <u>when</u> I visited Taiwan last winter. Um, my Taiwan's, um, um, classmates tell me, tells me that the Yaomingshan is such an interesting place that I couldn't miss it. I know the chance is so valuable; maybe sometime, maybe in my whole life I couldn't visit Taiwan again. <u>So</u> he took me in motorcar <u>and</u> we rushed to the Yaomingshan in the dark of the night. <u>And</u> I can smell the warm spring of the Yaomingshan. <u>And</u> we could see from the mountains the whole outlet, outlook of Taibei. I think that's the most fascinating light in my whole life. I couldn't forget it.* (Student A-6)

Advanced student A-8 did not use any temporal markers at all in [4.9]. She started by introducing the physical setting of her episode including the time and place; then she explained why she was there at the publication house. What followed was a brief explanation of the relevance of the man. The student then talked about the uniqueness of her experience and concluded by reiterating why it was special. Advanced student A-6 organized her narrative of [4.10] in a similar manner. No other temporal markers occurred than *when* which defined the time frame of the episode. This student first introduced the time and place of her experience. What followed was an explanation why it was a special experience, after which was an account of her experience at Yaomingshan. Like student A-8, she also wrapped up her narration by emphasizing how that experience was special. Overall, the above two narratives extracted the most peculiar aspects of the episodes, which led the hearer naturally to the conclusion of the unforgettableness of the experience. Compared to the above narratives by intermediate students which were organized sequentially by temporal markers, these two narratives of

advanced students were more sophisticated in structure. This result was consistent with Evensen's (1990) study in which the medium-level group was more likely than the advanced-level group to resort to the chronological dimension as a primary structuring strategy in their written narratives.

Another discrepancy between the intermediate and advanced groups involved the use of another temporal marker *at last* which introduced the ending of the episode. The excerpts that contained this connective are given below.

Intermediate Students

[4.11] *I see, I saw a very old man who sit in a, sit alone, and, I felt very pity and want to help him. But at last there is a little girl, went, went, went there and called him grandfather, and, and take him, him home.* (Student I-9)

[4.12] *And um, we, our, our class play very well in the game, although um, at last we lost the game, they behave very brave.* (Student I-5)

[4.13] *And I think, I thought it, thought it over, and at last, I made my own decision to study again, to attend the examination again.* (Student I-4)

Intermediate students I-9, I-5, and I-4 all used *at last* in the above three examples. The discourse segments introduced by *at last* were only connected with the other parts of the narrative sequentially; the ends of the episodes were given abruptly with no transitional information before them. To be specific, in the case of [4.11], there was no apparent relation between the fact that the speaker wanted to help the old man and the little girl showed up to help. In the case of [4.12], the result that *we lost the game* was somewhat surprising regardless of the appearance of *at last* which came right after *our class play*

very well; no explanation was given about the failure of the game. Similarly, in [4.13], although the decision to study seemed to be the result of *I thought it over*, again, it was not clear what specific considerations contributed to such a decision. Comparatively speaking, the following two, and the only instances of *at last* in the corpus of advanced students, functioned more effectively as a transitional device.

Advanced Students

[4.14] *But later because I was too, because I was too, I think because I was too nosy, I asked him a lot of private questions, and she, at last she turned out to be very unhappy.* (Student A-4)

[4.15] *But my friend, my friend kept encouraging me. At last, I got the admission, but she failed.* [A-3]

In both of these two excerpts of narrations, the two discourse segments connected by *at last* were not only related by being sequential in time; the second segment in both cases was also a logical result of the first segment. In [4.14], *she turned out to be very happy* was caused by *I asked him a lot of private questions*. In [4.15], the fact that *my friend kept encouraging me* was a factor contributing to *I got the admission.* Therefore, these two occurrences of *at last* both provided smoother transitions between ideas.

To sum up, there were no significant statistical differences between intermediate and advanced students in occurrence ratio and variety of ideational markers that occurred in narrations of past experiences. Both the intermediate and advanced groups had many instances of temporal markers. Nevertheless, use of temporal markers seemed more characteristic of intermediate students whose narrations were often presented in the form

of a sequential combination of events, while advanced students tended to structure their narratives in a more sophisticated and logical way. In addition, the analysis of *at last* showed that some advanced students were able to use it more effectively as a coherence device.

Description

This task required students to describe one of their friends (see Task 3 in Appendix B). It was expected that students would depend heavily on *and* to add ideas in a rather loose manner and parallel discrete features of their friends since the task involved putting together various points, particularly when considering the transitory nature of speaking and lack of preparation time. Another possibility was less use of temporal markers compared to the above narration task.

Overall Use

Statistically, the median of intermediate students (median=0.70, range=0.69) was higher than that of advanced students (median=0.56, range=0.73). However, the Mann-Whitney *U* test on occurrence ratio was not significant, z=-.98, p>.05. Therefore, overall there was again no significant difference in frequency ratio between these two proficiency levels. The same was true for ideational marker variety. The variety median of intermediate students (median=4, range=4) was slightly higher than that of advanced students (median=3, range =5). But the Mann-Whitney *U* test was not significant, z=-.28, p>.05. This suggested that intermediate and advanced students did not differ significantly in variety as expected.

Table 4.9. Summary of *Ideational Markers by Proficiency Level for Description*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.69	1169 words	12: and (44), but (12), when (8), also (4), so (4), because (3), or (1), first (1), second (1), for example (1), still (1), for (1)	81
Advanced	0.55	1419 words	12: and (47), when (7), because (6), so (5), also (3), but (3), whenever (2), particularly (1), although (1), since (1), if (1), for (1)	78

We can see from Table 4.9 that although advanced students overall made longer descriptions than intermediate students, the intermediate group (token = 81) had slightly more occurrences of ideational markers than the advanced group (token =78). Naturally, the intermediate group (ratio =.69) exceeded the advanced group (ratio =.55) in occurrence of ideational markers per 1000 words. Both proficiency groups used the same number of types of ideational markers. These comparison results were the same as those for the above narration task. On the other hand, compared to the narration task discussed above, this description task did not elicit as much use of temporal markers as expected. There was only one type (i.e. *when*) with a total occurrence of 8 for the intermediate group, and three types (i.e. *when, whenever, since*), with a total occurrence of 11 for the advanced group. Also, as expected above, *and* was used predominantly by both proficiency groups; it accounted for the majority of all occurrences of ideational markers for both proficiency groups, with a percentage of 54% for the intermediate group and 60% for the advanced group. These proportions were noticeably higher than any other five tasks, as shown in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10 *Use of And by Proficiency Level Across Tasks*

		Narration	**Description**	**Comparison**	**Opinion**	**Hypothesis**	**Apology**
I	Token	21	44	46	35	11	13
	Proportion	0.33	**0.54**	0.41	0.38	0.28	0.40
A	Token	31	47	57	29	15	20
	Proportion	0.53	**0.60**	0.47	0.31	0.33	0.47

Table 4.11. *Ideational Markers Used by Individual Students for Description*

Intermediate				**Advanced**			
Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-9	0.99	4: and(9) but(2) so(2) when(1)	14	**A-10**	1.03	2: and (12) also(1)	13
I-4	0.82	5: and(6) when(3) because (2) also(2) so(1)	14	**A-4**	0.95	4: and(5) when (2) because (1) particularly(1)	9
I-1	0.79	2: and (8) when(1)	9	**A-5**	0.64	7: because (2) when (2) whenever (2) and (1) but(1) so(1) since (1)	10
I-5	0.77	2: and (5) but (1)	6	**A-8**	0.60	2: and(8) if(1)	9
I-2	0.73	4: and (5) but (3) also(1) so(1)	10	**A-3**	0.58	2: and (6) also(1)	7
I-8	0.67	6: and(2) when(2) first(1) second(1) for example(1) also(1)	8	**A-2**	0.54	5: and (4) so(1) but(1) because (1) for(1)	8
I-6	0.56	4: but(2) and (1)	5	**A-9**	0.53	2: and (3) when (1)	4

		when(1) or(1)					
I-7	0.55	3: and(3) but(1) for(1)	5	**A-7**	0.46	4: and (2) also(1) so (1) when(1)	5
I-3	0.53	4: and (3) but(2) because(1) still(1)	7	**A-1**	0.41	5: and (4) so (2) but (1) when (1) although (1)	9
I-10	0.30	2: and(2) but(1)	3	**A-6**	0.30	2: because (2) and (2)	4

Individual Variation

It is shown in Table 4.11 that there were five intermediate students and five advanced students who used temporal markers (mostly *when* which occurred 16 times out of 19 occurrences of temporal markers). Although there were some uses of temporal markers by students at both proficiency levels, unlike those used for the narration task which were mostly used to indicate specific time or time sequence, temporal markers for this description task were often invoked to characterize general situations. Among students who used *when*, except for student I-9 in the intermediate group and students A-1, A-7 and A-9 in the advanced group who used *when* to mark specific time, all other students used *when* to define general circumstances. The following excerpts were drawn from the descriptions of all those students to illustrate this feature.

Intermediate Students

[4.16] *When he smiles, I can see the delight in his eyes.* (Student I-1)

[4.17] *And sometimes when I, <u>when</u> I was not my, not myself, he will, he will chat with me, and make me, make me happy again.* (Student I-4)

[4.18] *And also she gives me a lot of help <u>when</u> I was in a very hard situation.* [Student I-6]

[4.19] *<u>When</u> you told her, when you told her a very sad story, sh-, she will cry a lot.* (Student I-8)

<u>Advanced Students</u>

[4.20] *And she never, never turns her back to me <u>when</u> I'm in trouble. Um, per-, particularly <u>when</u> I face suspects and diffi-, difficulties, I will call him, I will call her and she will always offer her help to me.* [Student A-4]

[4.21] *But Just <u>when</u> I want her, she's always there.* (Student A-5]

Intermediate students I-4, I-6, I-8 and advanced students A-1 and A-5 all used *when* to define the situation when their friends were there to help. Such use of this temporal marker helped these students characterize their friends to fulfill the task of description.

Table 4.9 also indicates that in many cases in both the intermediate and advanced groups, there was a heavy use of *and*. In particular, the intermediate student I-1 and advanced student A-10 both used *and* almost exclusively. Their descriptions are provided in full below:

<u>Intermediate Student</u>

[4.22] *Um, I, I have a best friend. We just know each other for one year, <u>and</u> he's a boy, <u>and</u> he's very special to me. She, he's tall, about 1.8 meter, meters tall, <u>and</u> she's not so thin as general Chinese boys. She's strong,*

not fat, but strong. And he likes playing, he, he likes playing football. He doesn't like playing basketball, and what attracts me most is his eyes; and his eyes like, it's like the beautiful new moons, new moon in the sky, its arches. When he smiles, I can see the delight in his eyes, and he's very kind to people, very kind to people. And he, he always treat me. Yeah. [Student I-1]

Advanced student

[4.23] *Um, I have a lot of friends. And they have different personalities and characters. And one of my friend, she is very beautiful. And she likes travel, and she loves visit a lot of interest, place of interest. And her aim is to have the certificate of tourist in Beijing. And he succeed, and he had that certificate last year. And he likes his, her career very much. And he likes to communicate with others, especially foreigners. I think her English was very excellent. He can speak fluently English with foreigners. And also she is very good at communicating with other people. And I think she's very, he has a, he has the ability to do her job well. And I think he has a bright future.* [Student A-10]

Advanced student A-10 (ratio=1.03) used ideational markers more frequently in [4.23] than intermediate student I-1 (ratio=0.79) in [4.22]. Except for one instance of the temporal marker *when* by intermediate student I-1 and one instance of another elaborative marker *also* by advanced student A-10, *and* was the only connective used, with 8 and 12 occurrences respectively. It strung the utterances together loosely in an additive manner

in the two descriptions. There was no clear indication of structure in their descriptions of their friends. This is consistent with the expectation that additive markers would be heavily used in oral description.

On the other hand, there were also students who invoked the use of more varied ideational markers in their descriptions. This can be illustrated by the following two examples which had the greatest variety of ideational markers in the intermediate and advanced groups respectively. They were descriptions made by intermediate student I-8 and advanced student A-5 respectively.

Intermediate Student

[4.24] *My best friends now is studying in Jiangxi, Nanchang. I like her very much. First, he's very lovely, and cute. Um, he, he like-, when we together, he often told me some special things, for example, the stars, and also the information about her favorite, her idle stars. And second, she, she always bring me some special gifts. For example, one time he went to Anhui to, paint. He bringing some beautiful direction back, I like them so much. My best friends is, a, a little sensitive. When you told her, when you told her a very sad story, sh-, she will cry a lot. And also she's very kind. I like, I like her very much, my best friend.* (Student I-8)

Advanced Student

[4.25] *My best friend is called Liang Xuying. Her, she's studying in Tianjin Industrial University, one of the best universities in Hebei province. We were friends ever since we were first grade in primary school, that about*

> *13 years of friendship. She is so unique to me, not only because we have known each other for such a long time, but also because we have very similar experiences. Um, whenever I met a problem, I always telephone her, she seems to be always ready to help me get out of my difficulty. I remember last time when I suffers from the loss of my boyfriend, I was so sad. And she just, whenever she had time, she just gave me a phone call and make sure that I am happy on that day. Well, I don't think friends need to contact much, but just when I want her, she's always there. So I am very thankful of her.* (Student A-5)

Students I-8 and A-5 used 6 and 7 different connectives respectively to relate different parts of their descriptions. Interestingly, intermediate student I-8's description [4.24] used enumerators (i.e. *first, second*) to list sequentially the primary characteristics of her friend and *for example* to illustrate her second point. Comparatively, advanced student A-5's description was more casual and spontaneous. She used ideational markers to indicate a variety of relations: causative (*since, because*), temporal (*when, whenever*), contrastive (*but*) and inferential (*so*), in addition to parallel relations marked by *and*. Nevertheless, it was fairly easy to get the major points: one was that they'd known each other for a long time, and the other was that her friend was always there when needed. In particular, her use of *since* highlighted the durability of their friendship and the two uses of *whenever* served to emphasize how nice her friend was. A similar phenomenon was observed in the description of advanced student A-4 who used *particularly* to stress points. The excerpt that contained the word is provided below to illustrate its use.

[4.26] *I admire her a lot because she always does whatever she likes. And she never turn, turns her back to me when I'm in trouble. Um, par-, <u>particularly</u> when I face suspects and diffi-, difficulties, I will call him, I will call her and she will always offer her help to me.*

Here, *particularly* was used to highlight the point made in preceding utterances that the student's friend was always there when she needed help. Sophisticated words such as *whenever* and *particularly* were not seen in the discourse of intermediate students.

Overall, there were no statistical differences in the frequency and variety of ideational markers between intermediate and advanced students for this task of describing a friend. For both the intermediate and advanced groups, there was a heavy use of *and* as an additive strategy to connect utterances, and less use of temporal markers compared to the narration task above. Furthermore, temporal markers were used differently than for the narration task in that they were used to characterize general situations. The comparison of the descriptions of an intermediate and advanced students showed that the intermediate student used enumerators to mark idea divisions sequentially while the advanced student resorted to more varied discourse relations to highlight the points she was making. Another feature was that two advanced students had uses of some sophisticated ideational markers (i.e. *whenever* and *particularly*) which were not found in the discourse of intermediate students.

Comparison

For this comparison task, students were asked to compare their hometown with a city they visited (see Task 5 in Appendix B). As this task nominated two things (places)

to discuss, compared to the narration and description tasks which only involved one (a past experience and a friend respectively), it was expected that there would be longer answers and greater use of ideational markers. It was also assumed that contrastive markers would be used to compare and contrast different aspects of two places.

Overall Use

Like the above statistical comparisons made for the narration and description tasks, although intermediate students (median =0.71, range=0.58) exceeded advanced students (median=0.64, range=0.68) in occurrence ratio median, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was not significant, z=-1.1, p>.05. Overall students at these two proficiency levels did not differ significantly in ideational marker frequency. As for variety, the medians of intermediate and advanced students were both 5, with a range of 4 for intermediate students and 6 for advanced students. Mann-Whitney *U* test on variety was not significant either, z=-.12, p>.05. This indicated that there was not a major discrepancy in ideational marker variety between intermediate and advanced students when they made comparisons.

Compared to the above narration and description tasks, this comparison task overall elicited much longer answers, more occurrences and a much greater variety of ideational markers for both the intermediate and advanced groups, as expected. It also had the most frequent use of ideational markers among all task functions (see later sections for other task functions than narration and description). On the other hand, Table 4.12 also suggests that as with the narration and description tasks, the intermediate group used ideational markers with greater frequency as suggested by the ratios (0.92 vs. 0.65),

although the advanced group (1875 words) made longer comparisons than the intermediate group (1209 words), and their raw tokens (token=122) were higher than those of the intermediate groups (token=111).

Table 4.12. *Summary of Ideational Markers by Proficiency Level for Comparison*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.92	1209 words	16: and (46), but(22), also(10), so(6), while (6), because (4), if(3), although (2), since (causative)(2), for (causative) (2), for (topical) (2), 'cause(1), of course (1), first (1), first of all(1), second(1),	110
Advanced	0.65	1875 words	19: and(57), but(22), also(14), because(4), so(4), while(3), secondly(2), although(2), if(3), firstly(1), thirdly(1), third(1), still(1), as for (1), when(1), that is(1), whenever (1), for (causative) (1)	122

Also as expected, Table 4.12 indicates many instances of contrastive markers in both proficiency groups. Specifically, the intermediate group used three types (i.e. *but, while, although*) with a total occurrence of 30, and the advanced group used four types (i.e. *but, while, although, still*) with a total occurrence of 28. As suggested by Table 4.13, among all selected tasks, this comparison task elicited the most tokens of contrastive markers as well as the greatest proportions in relation to all ideational marker occurrences for both proficiency groups. It appeared typical of students at both proficiency levels to contrast two places with such connectives.

Table 4.13. *Use of Contrastive Markers by Proficiency Level across Task Functions*

		Narration	Description	Comparison	Opinion	Hypothesis	Apology
I	Token	11	12	**30**	12	1	4
	Proportion	0.13	0.15	**0.27**	0.13	0.03	0.11
A	Token	13	4	**27**	13	7	4
	Proportion	0.19	0.04	**0.23**	0.15	0.16	0.07

Meanwhile, Table 4.12 also shows instances of some other types of markers that were not seen in the answers to the above narration and description tasks. Specifically, topic markers appeared in the discourse of both proficiency groups, which were not used for any other tasks except for the opinion task that will be discussed in the next section. The intermediate group used *for* twice and the advanced used *as for* once to mark topic change. Another phenomenon was the emergence of enumerators for both the intermediate (i.e. *first, first of all, second*) and advanced groups (firstly, secondly, third, thirdly), which occurred three times 3 both groups.

Table 4.14. *Ideational Markers Used by Individual Students for Comparison*

Intermediate				Advanced			
Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**

I-8	1.07	8: but(5)
		and(4)
		also(2)
		so(2)
		since(causative) (1)
		first (1)
		although (1)
		for (1)
			15	**A-8**	1.05	8: and(11)
						if(2)
						while(2)
						so(1)
						firstly(1)
						secondly(1)
						but(1)
						thirdly(1)
							20

I-9	1.07	4: and (11) but(2) because (2) so(1)	11	**A-3**	0.81	8: and (7) but (2) so(1) also(1) because (1) although(1) still(1) as for (1)	15

I-5	1.02	5: and(6) but(2) also(1) since (causative)(1) while: 1	18	**A-1**	0.78	4: and (10) also (6) but(4) when(1)	21
I-3	0.79	6: and(3) also(2) but(1) so(1) because(1) of course (1)	9	**A-6**	0.69	5: and(6) but(3) and(1) because (1)	11
I-2	0.71	5: and(6) also(3) but(3) so(2) because (1)	15	**A-4**	0.64	7: and(5) also(2) because(1) secondly(1) third(1) so(1) if(1)	12
I-6	0.70	3: and(4) but(3) 'cause(1)	8	**A-7**	0.63	5: but(4) and(2) so(1) that is(1) while(cont)(1)	9
I-10	0.55	5: but(3) and(2) second(1) if(1) first of all(1)	8	**A-2**	0.49	4: also(4) and(3) but(2) still(1)	10

I-4	0.53	5: and(5)
		but(2)
		although(1)
		if(1)
		for (causative) (1)
			10	**A-5**	0.49	5: but (4)
						and(3)
						although(1)
						because(1)
						whenever (1)
							10

I-1	0.50	3: while (contrastive) (5) and(3) if (1)	9	**A-10**	0.49	3: and(7) also(1) for (causative) (1)	9
I-7	0.49	5: also(2) and(2) but (1) when(1) for (1)	7	**A-9**	0.37	2: and(3) but(2)	5

Individual Variation

As shown by Table 4.14, contrastive markers occurred in the comparisons of all intermediate students and eight advanced students. The following excerpts from two intermediate and advanced students respectively are provided to illustrate the general use of such markers to establish contrast.

Intermediate Student

[4.27] *My hometown is in the east of Bei-, Beijing. Um, it is not very famous. But Beijing is very famous to the world.* (Student I-4)

[4.28] *It* [Beijing] *is very big, and a lot, um, have a large, um, amount of, popula-, big population, while my hometown, there are, lit, little population.* (Student I-5)

Advanced Students

[4.29] *In Changchun, the students in college, they will feel that they are not under stress. And they also strive for their future in every aspect. They will, they will fill themselves with so many knowledge. But in, but in Beijing, everyone have narrowed their view they will strive for, and very specified goal, which is very bad, very hard.* (Student A-1)

[4.30] *Weihai is very close to the sea, while Beijing is a mainland city*. (Student A-7)

In [4.27] and [4.28], intermediate students I-4 and I-5 made contrasts between their hometowns and Beijing in terms of famousness and population respectively. In [4.29] and

[4.30], advanced students A-1 and A-7 contrasted people in Changchun and Beijing, and Weihai and Beijing respectively. Such contrastive relations were made explicit either by *but* in [4.27] and [4.28] or by *while* in [4.29] and [4.30]. Use of such contrastive devices enabled students at both proficiency levels to explicitly establish differences between two places.

There was also a greater variety of ideational markers in individual answers for this task compared to the narration and description tasks above, which was suggested by the higher medians as well as individual variation (see Table 4.14) for both proficiency groups. In particular, intermediate student I-8 and advanced students A-8 and A-3 all used eight types of ideational markers to mark discourse structure. The full responses made by intermediate student I-8 and advanced student A-8, which also had the most frequent use of ideational markers in the intermediate and advanced groups respectively, are provided below to illustrate such diversity.

Intermediate Student

[4.31] *Well, since I have not been to so many places, I just can compare my hometown with Beijing. First, I should admit that Beijing is one modern city. There are many departments, and also many markets, and also many place to buy beautiful clothes. But compared with Beijing, I like my hometown. But, first my hometown's people is very poor. And although they are very poor, and not very rich, compared with Beijing's people, they are very kind. And also especially for the people came from other place, they are very kind to them. But I don't, I don't like Beijing's people very much. They are a little ironi-, ironit. Maybe we can say ironic. For*

the people from other place, the, the Beijing people are not very kind, and I don't like them. And also for my hometown, there are many people familiar with me, so I can communicate with them very well. But in Beijing, many strangers. For me, it's a little difficult to communicate with them. (Student I-8)

Advanced Student

[4.32] *Well, my hometown is a small town. It's very peaceful and it has a population of 20,000 people. And the city I am living in now is Beijing. It's a huge city. It's the capital of China. One of the largest city of, in China. So there are more, more differences than similarities between my hometown and Beijing. Firstly, the traffic in my hometown is extremely smooth. There's no problem with that. But in Beijing, you better luck, you stuck anywhere any time. And secondly, the people in my hometown are very, are very innocent, if I can say so, and I, while in Beijing I met a lot of very sophisticated people. They had very colorful experiences; and they, they had a lot of experiences both in China and abroad. And thirdly, my hometown is very peaceful, and very quiet. And in the morning, if you run on the street, you can hear the bird singing, and it's very clean, while in Beijing, it's very noisy and you can hardly hear the bird singing. And it's not that clean. The pollution is very serious.* (Student A-8)

Although both [4.31] and [4.32] used a wide range of ideational markers, with the ratio of intermediate student I-8 slightly higher than that of advanced student A-8 (1.07 vs. 1.05),

a closer look revealed that discrepancies existed between them in the way ideational markers were used to organize their comparisons. The major points the intermediate student I-8 was trying to make in [4.31] were the modernity of Beijing and difference between people in Beijing and the student's hometown. However, it was not very easy to follow the development of her arguments. After characterizing the modernity of Beijing, with the occurrence of *but* as a clue, the addressee would expect a characterization of her hometown along a similar line. But instead of providing information as to how her hometown was different in the level of modernity, the student used *but* to mark her positive attitude towards her hometown. Then without explaining why she liked her hometown, she used another *but* to direct the addressee to the negative fact that people in her hometown were poor. After that, with no further elaboration or comparison with people in Beijing, she used another contrastive marker *although* to start another contrast of her hometown, i.e. the people in her hometown were kind. Although it can be inferred that the real purpose of the student was to build the argument that people in her hometown were nice, equal emphasis of all points and local use of ideational markers made the comparison rather confusing. Furthermore, her two uses of *first* were also a bit confusing in that she did not really introduce another point parallel to what she presented as the first point. The combination of *for* and *and also* in *And also for my hometown, there are many people familiar with me, so I can communicate with them very well* was also confusing because *for* indicated a topic shift while *and also* marked a continuation of a topic. In addition, the student did not elaborate much on the point that people in her hometown were more familiar. In general, in this comparison, ideational markers were

used to connect relatively small chunks of ideas; furthermore, some instances of them did not provide transitions that were coherent even between adjacent discourse units.

Comparatively, in [4.32], the comparison made by A-8 who used eight different ideational markers, ideational markers played a more positive role in idea development. The connections they built were at a more global level. *So* in *so there are more, more differences than similarities between my hometown and Beijing* was transitional not only for adjacent utterances. Rather, it introduced a conclusion of the prior general information about Beijing and her hometown as well as prefaced a thesis that was supported by details that followed. In addition, *firstly*, *secondly* and *third* were used to highlight the major differences and similarities which were all supported by further details. Also, the two *while*s were also transitional beyond adjacent utterances in that they presented contrastive ideas that were supported further by succeeding utterances. Therefore, the ideational markers used in this comparison marked clearly how the discourse proceeded, which made it easier for us to see how the two places were different and similar.

We have just seen that intermediate student I-8 used topic marker *for* only for a minor division of ideas. Advanced student A-3 also used a topic marker (i.e. *as for*) to signal a change of topic, but for a more major division of ideas. The full response of this student is provided below to illustrate this difference.

[4.33] *I want to compare my my ci-, city, hometown, with the hometown of Beijing. <u>And</u> I have been studying in Beijing for almost two years. And the first time I came here, I, I, I felt that Beijing is a great city, and so big, and I often get lost, around the city. And the major difference between Beijing and my hometown is that Beijing is a more international country,*

international city. And it's very important in China. And it's, because it's the capital, and it is also the economic and political center of China, so I think Beijing is more international, and more global, globalized. <u>As for</u> my hometown, I think there's still, there's still room for improvement, because although, although my hometown is famous for its co-, coal, and, and its contribution to the international energy, there are still some, some, there's still some improvements to be, needs to be made, such as the, such as the problem of the unemployment, and the rising price of the house. But that is a common problems in, both in Beijing and my hometown. I think Beijing is more— (Student A-3)

The major aspect advanced student A-3 compared was the modernity of Beijing and her hometown. *As for* was used here to separate the discussion of these two places in the middle of the discourse. It was placed clearly at a point where the discussion of Beijing ended and the discussion of her hometown began. Furthermore, this marker introduced a general statement *there's still room for improvement*, around which the latter half of the discourse revolved. In comparison, intermediate student I-8 used *for* in [4.38] which prefaced a topic that was not discussed in such great detail. This distinction in topic marker use was especially noteworthy when considering that student A-3 made a longer comparison than student I-8 (188 words vs. 168 words). Therefore, the advanced student used the topic marker to mark a more major discourse boundary than the intermediate student did.

In short, compared to other tasks, for both the intermediate and advanced groups, the task of comparing two places overall elicited a more frequent use of ideational

markers in general; it also had longer answers that contained a greater variety of ideational markers than the above narration and description tasks. Furthermore, contrastive markers were used more often than any other task functions to establish contrasts between two places. Statistically, there was no statistical difference in either occurrence rate or variety of ideational marker use between intermediate and advanced students, although the intermediate group overall had a higher occurrence frequency than the advanced group. On the other hand, the examples we examined above suggested that the advanced students used ideational markers, particularly topic markers and numerics more effectively to constrain larger spans of discourse than the intermediate student, which resulted in a more coherent discourse.

Opinion

This task asked students to talk about the positive benefits and negative consequences of modern machines like computers (see Task 10 in Appendix B). For this task, connectives indicating transitions from the benefits to the consequences were expected to be seen in the answer.

Overall Use

Although the median of occurrence ratio of intermediate students (median =0.77, range =0.48) was higher than that of advanced students (median=0.56, range=0.57), the Mann-Whitney *U* test was not significant, z=-1.59, p>.05. This suggested that the discrepancy in ideational marker frequency for this task was not significant. As for variety, the median of variety of intermediate students (median =6, range=6) was also

higher than that of advanced students (median=4, range=4). However, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was not significant either, z=-1.21, p>.05. Therefore, the difference in type of ideational markers was not statistically significant between intermediate and advanced students.

Table 4.15. *Summary of Ideational Markers by Proficiency Level for Opinion*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.74	1251	20: and(35), also (11), but(10), if(7), so(4), for(3), for example(4), when(3), because(2), then(2), at the same time(2), on the other hand (2), since (temporal(1), of course(1), as for(1), as to (1), whenever(1), on one hand(1), secondly(1), first(1)	93
Advanced	0.61	1247	15: and(29), but(9), so(7), also(7), if(5), when(3), still(2), for example(2), for instance(1), on one hand(1), on the other hand(1), although(1), then(1), firstly(1), as(1)	76

Table 4.15 shows the overall use of ideational markers for this task by proficiency level. Compared to the above comparison task which also involved discussion, this task elicited a lower ratio of occurrence per 1000 words for both the intermediate and advanced groups. This may be an effect of task topics. The topic of computer was more abstract than the topic of places where students had lived or visited, therefore probably more difficult to handle. The table indicates that the intermediate group exceeded the advanced group in type (20 vs. 15) and token (93 vs. 68). Furthermore, like most task functions (i.e. narration, description, comparison, and hypothesis that will be discussed later), this task also elicited more frequent ideational marker use from the intermediate

group (ratio=0.74) than the advanced group (ratio=0.61). With regard to specific ideational markers, there were some that were not used for the above narration, description and comparison tasks, nor for the hypothesis and apology tasks that will be discussed in later sections. *On one hand, on the other hand* were found in the discourse of both proficiency groups, which was not surprising considering that the task required a discussion of opposing aspects of computer use. Another newly emerged marker was *at*

Table 4.16 *Ideational Markers Used by Individual Students for Opinion*

Intermediate				**Advanced**			
Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-1	0.90	5: and(8) also(2) but(1) if(1) so (1)	13	**A-9**	0.93	6: and(2) if(2) for example(1) but(1) so(1) when(1)	8
I-5	0.86	5: and(5) also (1) but(1) at the same time(1) on the other hand (1)	9	**A-4**	0.71	8: but(2) so(2) if(1) for instance(1) on one hand(1) on the other hand(1) and(1)	9
I-9	0.85	6: and(6) also(2) because(1) so(1) if(1) whenever(1)	12	**A-1**	0.69	5: and(8) also(3) so(2) but(1) if(1)	15
I-10	0.84	7: and(3) also(2) so(2) but(1) on one hand(1) on the other hand(1) if(1)	11	**A-3**	0.67	3: but(1) although(1) still(1)	3

I-4	0.74	8: and(4) but(2) if(2) then(1) for example(1) because(1) secondly(1) when(1)	13	**A-6**	0.56	5: and(3) but(1) also(1) for example(1) still(1)	7
I-7	0.67	2: and(5) for(2)	7	**A-2**	0.56	4: and(5) but(2) also(2) so(1)	10
I-2	0.64	4: and(3) also(3) but(2) first(1)	9	**A-10**	0.48	4: and(3) but(2) also(2) for example(1)	8
I-3	0.64	7: for example(2) and(1) if(1) but(1) also(1) at the same time(1) as (1)	8	**A-7**	0.47	4: and(2) but(1) then(1) when(1)	5
I-6	0.56	4: but(2) and(1) also(1) If(1)	5	**A-8**	0.43	4: and(3) firstly(1) if(1) so(1)	6
I-8	0.45	7: when(2) and(1) since (temporal(1) for example(1) for(1) so(1) then (temporal)(1)	8	**A-5**	0.36	4: and(2) as(1) also(1) when(1)	5

the same time for the intermediate group. In addition, there were also some instances of illustrating devices (i.e. *for example* and *for instance*) for both proficiency groups (4 instances for the intermediate group and 3 instances for the advanced group), which was only used once for the description task by an intermediate student. The specific ideational markers used by each student are provided in Table 4.16.

Individual Variation

As shown by Table 4.16, *on the other hand*, which was peculiar to this task, was used by two intermediate students (i.e. students I-5 and I-10) and one advanced student (i.e. student A-4). Excerpts were taken from their responses to this task to illustrate its use.

Intermediate Students

[4.34] *Computer, um become more and popular. And it indeed bring a lot of benifts. … But on the other hand, there are a lot of disadvantage, such as the, also, also, the computer also have, have a lot of disease, will broken, and you will repair it.* (Student I-5)

[4.35] *Well, no invention has received so, such, so much prai-, praise and abuse like computer. On one hand, he changed our life style. He changed the way of shopping, the way we communication, the way of ringing. And on, on the other hand, he also bring us a lot of problem, problems.* (Student I-10)

Advanced Student

[4.36] *Um, so I think the most viable solution is to see this modern technology on two, um, um, critically. On one hand, it will bring us convenience; but on the other hand it, we must, we must be cautions, we must be aware of its shortage, or its harm.* (Student A-4)

In all the above three excerpts, students I-5, I-10 and A-4 used *on the other hand* similarly to move in their argument from the positive aspect of computer use to the negative aspect.

As we have noted earlier, *at the same time* was only used for this task; the two instances were both by intermediate students (i.e. Students I-3 and I-5). The responses of these two students are provided below in full.

Intermediate Students

[4.37] *Just, just, just as the man said, modern machines make our life easier. But also, but at the same time, it cause many dif-, cause many inconvenience. I think the positive, the advan-, the advantage of modern, modern machine is making our life more convenient. We can pay our attention on, we can pay more attention on the things need our to think, but not the easy, easy, easy, but not waste our energy on the easiest things, for example typing. And the disadvantage is inevitable. For example, if your computer broken up, most, most statistics or materials lost, it will have a big problem. For example, the contract in the computer is lost.* (Student I-3)

[4.38] *Computer, um, nowadays become more and popular. And it indeed bring a lot of benefits. We can communicate with each other very well, despite the distant between us. And we can acquire a large number of resources in the, on the internet, and we can know a lot of things which happened, which happens in the world. And at the same time, it, um, cause a high efficiency, using computer to do some jobs. But on the other hand, there are a lot of disadvantage, such as the, also, also, the computer also have, have a lot of disease, will broken, and you will repair it.* (Student I-5)

At the same time was used to contrast the positive and negative aspects of computers by intermediate student I-3 and continue the discussion of the benefits by student I-5. What was shared by these two examples is that neither student provided details to elaborate on the point prefaced by *at the same time*; instead, they jumped to the opposite side, i.e. the advantage of computers in the case of student I-3, and disadvantage in the case of student I-5. Similarly, the other ideational markers used in these two responses were also used between short discourse units. To be specific, *but* in [4.37] was a marker of minor discourse boundaries, which only connected ideas contained in the two adjacent utterances before and after it. In spite of the fact that *but* in [4.38] marked the beginning of the discussion of the disadvantages of computers, the subsequent supporting details were rather short. The narrow scope of discourse restrained by connectives was also found in the use of another marker, i.e. *for example*, which was peculiar to this task. In the above response of [4.37] of intermediate student I-3, there were two uses of *for example* in a row at the end of the answer. The second occurrence was used to signal an illustration of a larger illustration marked by another *for example*; this illustration was

only a single utterance with no further support or elaboration. Therefore, in general, ideational markers marked rather limited spans of discourse in these two responses.

Comparatively speaking, advanced students were more effective in using ideational markers to signal discourse structure by marking major boundaries and constructing structural hierarchies in their comparisons. The complete responses of two advanced students (Students A-10 and A-2), who had median varieties in the advanced group, are provided to illustrate this distinction.

> [4.39] *Um, high tech-, can give a lot of people, give a lot of convenience, for example, the computers. I think it's very, it's a great discovery, or invention of the machine in the 20th century. It's very useful; it's very convenient. You can get on the Internet very efficiently, and you can check what, whatever information you want, you want to know. You can look movies on the Internet. And you can type some letters, resumes in the computer. But I think every coin have two sides. It has also disadvantages. For example, some people especially youngsters, rely too much on the computers. They play computer games all day. And, and this ruins their future, definitely. I think also, we rely too much on computer will make people lazy. They don't want to write, but only type the letters on the computer. People don't want to go back, go out of home, only want to stay a home to read, to read text novels, or watching movies all day.* (Student A-10)

In the above response of advanced student A-10, the only instance of *but,* which occurred in *But I think every coin have two sides* marked the primary division between the two

major aspects of the influence of computers, unlike in both [4.37] and [4.38] of two intermediate students where it only connected ideas conveyed in immediately adjacent utterances. Also, *for example* was used here to mark a more major boundary than in [4.37], the response of intermediate student I-3, by leading an illustration of the point that computers also had their disadvantages, which lasted all the way till the end of the response. Furthermore, the two uses of *also* functioned beyond immediately neighboring utterances. In the first instance (in *It has also disadvantages*), it functioned as a continuation of the general statement *But I think every coin have two sides* which was followed by a series of supporting details. Similarly, in the second instance of *also*, which preceded *we rely too much on computer will make people lazy*, it led another discussion explaining how computers made people lazy at a lower level of the overall structural hierarchy of the response. The only other ideational marker than *for example*, *but*, and *also* in this response was *and* which linked loosely adjacent utterances within the frame delimited by ideas marked by *for example*, *but* and *also*. Therefore, ideational markers helped construct a rhetorical hierarchy of argument. This phenomenon was also found in the following response of [4.40] by advanced student A-2 who also had a median variety in the advanced group.

[4.40] *Yeah, I will <u>also</u> talk about computer. Computer really give us a lot, provide us a lot of convenience in our lives. <u>And</u> we, we know, we do something, we can type it in the computer. <u>And</u> we don't know something, we can search it in the Internet. <u>And</u> we miss some friend, we can send some email to her, or him. And, <u>and</u> we, we could also communicate with our professors, or student, or, or classmates through*

> *the computer, or in the chatroom. It is really, really very convenient. I love it; and I'm fond of it, using it. But the negative equi-, consequence is that some of my classmates has lost in trouble that they couldn't help love playing computer games day and night. They don't have the classes. They don't finish the homework. They just indulge themselves in playing, in playing computer games. I know it is not the fault of computer itself. But the factor is that it has bring serious consequence like this. So everything has the pros and cons. It is really a truth.* (Student A-2)

There were nine uses of ideational markers (five *and*s, two *but*s, one *also* and *so*). The use of *also* was particularly interesting. It may appear odd at first sight since there was no preceding utterance for it to point to. However, it functioned in fact as a coherence device in two senses. On the one hand, it related the student when taking the floor to the VOCI where two people were talking about the use of computers, which suggested that the student was interacting with the context. On the other hand, it connected the given discourse and the student's own discussion ideationally by marking the beginning of her own discussion in *I will also talk about computer* which specified her topic; that is, this word cued the hearer to the beginning of her response. The other primary boundary marker in this response was *so* which signaled the end of the discourse by concluding the entire answer in *So everything has the pros and cons*. In the middle of the response, *but* marked the major transition from the advantages to the disadvantages of computers. The other instance of *but* (in *but the factor is that it has bring serious consequences like this*) signaled the conclusion of the discussion of the disadvantages. As in the example of

[4.39], all instances of *and* occurred within the boundaries set by *so* and *but* to signal a continuation of the same line of argument. Overall, ideational markers in this response, as those in [4.39], provided useful cues for discussion development.

To conclude, although there were no significant statistical differences in the use of ideational markers, the intermediate group overall exceeded the advanced group in both frequency and variety like the situation of most other task functions. It also used more types of ideational markers than the advanced group. Qualitative analyses revealed some similarities and differences in the specific use of ideational markers between intermediate and advanced students. Some markers (e.g. *on the other hand*, *for example*) that were never or rarely used for other tasks were found in some responses of both the intermediate and advanced groups for this task. On the other hand, although some intermediate students adopted the use of *at the same time*, which was not used by any advanced student, their use of this connective as well as other ideational markers indicated that intermediate students tended to use them only to mark minor divisions between immediately adjacent utterances, while advanced students have been shown to be able to use ideational markers to provide clues to various levels of argument structure. It was also interesting that an advanced student invoked *also* at the beginning of her response to relate to the prior speaker on the VOCI, which contributed to both ideational and interactional coherence.

Hypothesis

For this task, students were required to provide an account of what they would do as a teacher when a student had been found cheating on a test (see Task 12 in Appendix

B). An important point to note is that although this task was designed for candidates to show that they are able to construct hypotheses, which is a feature to be seen in the oral discourse of superior level learners according to ACTFL guidelines, it turned out that in this study overall it did not elicit a key language feature related to hypothesis (except for two advanced students A-5 and A-6), i.e. use of subjunctive modality. Instead, there was a predominant use of auxiliary verb *will* that indicates simple future tense in the responses of most participating students, which made their responses less hypothetical and more like narratives of proposed actions. This is not surprising since successful construction of hypotheses is supposed to be a language feature exhibited by only superior level students according to the ACTFL guidelines, while the subjects of this study were all at either the intermediate or advanced levels. Nevertheless, their responses still had research value since our primary concern in this study was ideational marker use. It was expected that there might be some uses of lexical devices indicating sequence of actions in the responses of students to this task.

Overall Use

The occurrence frequency median of advanced students (median=0.53, range=0.75) was higher than that of intermediate students (median=0.43, range=0.78). However, again, as with the other task functions we've examined so far, the Mann-Whitney *U* test on occurrence ratio was not significant, $z=-.49$, $p>.05$, which suggested that advanced students did not use ideational markers significantly more often than intermediate students. As for variety, advanced students (median=3.5, range=4) were higher than intermediate students (median=2.5, range=4) in median. But the Mann-

Whitney U test on variety was not significant either, z=-.50, p>.05. Therefore, advanced students did not use more types of ideational markers than intermediate students for this task of hypothesis.

Table 4.17. *Summary of Ideational Markers by Proficiency Level for Hypothesis*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.56	735 words	12: and (11), first (7), then(5), if (5), because(4), so(2), for(2), but(1), also(1), at first (1), at last(1), or(1)	41
Advanced	0.51	875 words	10: and(15), but(7), first(6), if (5), because(4), so(3), or(3), also(1), of course(1)	45

As shown by Table 4.17, this task elicited a slightly lower occurrence ratio of ideational markers from advanced students (ratio=0.51) as a group than the intermediate group (ratio=0.56), which, together with the higher median of advanced students and lack of statistical significance mentioned above, indicated a lack of difference in ideational marker frequency between the two proficiency groups, which was consistent with the comparisons on the other task functions. Also like the majority of other task functions (i.e. narration, description, comparison, opinion and apology which will be discussed in a later section), the advanced group was higher than the intermediate group in length (875 words vs. 735 words). However, this hypothesis task brought forth shorter answers and fewer occurrences of ideational markers than those tasks for both the intermediate and advanced groups. A noticeable feature for both groups was the occurrence of temporal markers that indicate temporal sequence, as expected earlier. As we have seen earlier in Table 4.7, temporal markers accounted for the greatest portion (33%) of all ideational markers for the intermediate group. As for the advanced group, this task function ranked

third (13%), after the narration and description tasks, and was the only other task that elicited the use of markers signaling temporal sequence than the narration task, because the description task used temporal markers to characterize general situations, not to

Table 4.18 *Ideational Markers Used by Individual Students for Hypothesis*

Intermediate				**Advanced**			
Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-1	1.35	5: because(4) and(3) at first(1) then(1) but(1)	10	**A-4**	0.84	5: and(2) if(2) so(1) but(1) first(1)	7
I-8	0.67	5: first (1) if(2) so(1) and(1) also(1)	6	**A-10**	0.83	4: and(3) first (1) because(1) but(1)	6
I-10	0.76	4: and(2) first(1) then(1) at last(1)	5	**A-6**	0.70	4: and(2) because(2) so(1) also(1)	6
I2	0.73	3: then(3) and(2) first(1)	6	**A-7**	0.70	3: or(3) first(1) so(1)	5
I-5	0.48	3: and(1) for(1)	2	**A-2**	0.53	4: if(2) first (1) and(1) but(1)	5
I-4	0.37	2: if(2) first(1)	3	**A-9**	0.52	1: and(3)	3
I-9	0.36	2: and(2) first(1)	3	**A-8**	0.46	4: and(1) but(1) first(1) because(1)	4
I-6	0.31	2: first(1) if(1)	2	**A-3**	0.44	4: and(1) but(1) first(1) of course(1)	4
I-3	0.43	2: first(1) so(1) or(1)	3	**A-5**	0.34	2: and(2) if(1)	3
I-7	0.16	1: for(1)	1	**A-1**	0.16	1: but(2)	2

sequence events. For this hypothesis task, Table 4.17 suggests that the intermediate group used *first, then, at first* and *at last* with a total of 14 occurrences and the advanced students used *first* with a total of 6 occurrences, which marked sequence of future actions.

Individual Variation

As shown in Table 4.18, sequence markers (i.e. *first, then, at first, at last*) were used by more intermediate students (n=8) than advanced students (n=6), among whom, seven intermediate students and five advanced students started their answers with *first*, and one intermediate student with *at first*. Three of these intermediate students also resorted to other types of sequence markers in addition to *first* in their answers to signal a succession of actions, while all the six advanced students used only one type of sequence markers (i.e. *first*). The responses of these three intermediate students are provided in full to illustrate the sequence markers by the intermediate and advanced proficiency groups.

Intermediate Students

[4.41] *At first, I will be, I will be very proud, because I found their, I discovered that. And then I think, I maybe, I will be a little angry, because they cheated in my exam. And why, why did they cheat? Because they didn't work hard in my class. And, but I will not repart her, her or him, because everybody, I should give everybody another chance, shouldn't just, should, should be tolerant them.* (Student I-1)

[4.42] *First I will recall that what the, what the student which copy other, other people's work, um, the his, his condition of study. And then I will ask, ask*

some, ask the student some, something happened recently upon this student. Then I think I will didn't take, take quick action upon this issue. I think I will watched over for some time. And then I will take action. Maybe that's, that's some difficult for the student to do, finish the job, the task. (Student I-2)

[4.43] *First, I will ask him the reason why he cheat, the reason of his, um, cheatment. Um, and then I will try to communicate with, with him. I try to, um, I try to make him realize that, the seriousness of cheating. And I don't, I don't want to, to him, to be an honorable person. At last, I won't give him a high score. I will dismiss him.* (Student I-10)

Intermediate student I-1 used *at first* in [4.41] to mark her first reaction to the given situation, i.e. she would be proud. Immediately after that, she used *then* to signal a subsequent reaction that she would get angry. In [4.42], the response of student I-2, *first* was used to mark the beginning of the chain of her actions and *then* was used three times to introduce succeeding actions. Student I-10 signaled her sequence in [4.43] in a similar way except that she used *at last* to mark what she would do at the end. These three intermediate students in general all structured their responses sequentially.

In comparison, although six of the advanced students also used *first* to mark what they would do first, none organized their answers as sequentially as the above intermediate students did. The following complete responses by two advanced students who had median varieties in the advanced group are provided to illustrate this difference.

Advanced Students

[4.44] *First, I will call that student who copied others' work, and I ask her, and I ask him why. Maybe he has, recently his family is in trouble, and he doesn't, he can't squeeze time for the exam. So if their situation is really goes this way, I will probably forgive him. But maybe, but if he doesn't put his heart on the home, on the work, on, on the study. I will probably punish him, and teach him the harm of cheating.* (Student A-6)

[4.45] *First, I think I will fail this student without any que-, hesitation, because it is a very serious issue of, of cheating in these exams. Morally, it is unacceptable. But I will not simply fail, fail the students without having a talk with him or her. I will tell her or him why I would fail him or her. I will tell him the consequences that he or her must face by doing such a stupid thing. And I think she or he can learn the lesson well.* (Student A-8)

In [4.44], advanced student A-6 invoked *first* to mark what she would do, i.e. to have a talk on the phone with the student who cheated. The rest of her answer was all associated with this general statement. She used *if* twice to mark two possible situations connected with her phone call with the student who had cheated. These two conditions would then lead to different subsequent actions. In addition, this student also used *so* and *but* to preface the two uses of *if*, which made the logical relations more explicit. Specifically, *so* marked an expected result of her preceding speculation while *but* signaled a contrastive division of the two possible situations. Overall, this advanced student established a relational hierarchy in her account.

Similarly in [4.45], advanced student A-8 also used *first* at the beginning of her response to signal the major action she would take. She used *because* to explain why she

would take the action of failing the student. Then *but* was used to signal a divergence from the harshness of failing the student, i.e. she would talk with the student. Finally, she used *and* to introduce the general purpose of her actions. Therefore, both advanced students A-6 and A-8 used ideational markers to structure their responses in a more hierarchical and logical manner than the intermediate students examined above who organized their answers sequentially.

We can conclude that on the one hand, there were no significant statistical differences either in frequency or variety of ideational markers overall between intermediate and advanced students when they constructed hypotheses. However, qualitative analyses of students' responses suggested that although the majority of intermediate students and half of the advanced students invoked *first* to signal what they would do before anything else, advanced students had more complex structures through marking different reasoning and discourse levels with various ideational markers while intermediate students showed a heavier reliance on sequence markers in structuring their account of hypothesized actions.

Apology

This task asked students to apologize to a friend on an answering machine for missing a dinner engagement and explain why. It was expected that lexical devices marking reasons or results were typically used by students since the task required an explanation of the reason for not being there.

Overall Use

Although advanced students (median=0.63, range=0.81) slightly exceeded intermediate students (median=0.58, range=0.58) in occurrence ratio median, the Mann-Whitney *U* test on occurrence ratio was not significant, z=-.30, p>.05, which suggested no significant difference in frequency between these two proficiency levels. Similar comparison results were found with variety of ideational markers. The median of advanced students (median =3, range=2) was slightly higher than that of intermediate students (median=2, range=5), but the Mann-Whitney *U* test was not significant, z=-1.17, p>.05, indicating that overall variety difference between students at the two proficiency levels was not significant.

Table 4.19. Summary of *Ideational Markers by Proficiency Level for Apology*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.61	543 words	6: and(13), so(9), because (4), but(4), for(2), when(1)	33
Advanced	0.62	674 words	8: and(20), so(12), but(4), when(3), before (1), if(1), for(1), because (1)	43

There were several features that distinguished this task from the other tasks discussed above (i.e. narration, description, comparison, opinion and hypothesis). The advanced group had a slightly higher occurrence ratio than the intermediate group (see Table 4.19); it also had a greater variety than the intermediate group (8 vs. 6). Nevertheless, these two differences lacked statistical significance, as we have seen. Another characteristic is that both proficiency groups produced shorter answers with fewer tokens of ideational markers than they did with any of the other five tasks, although like the other tasks, the overall discourse length of the advanced group for this task was

longer than that of the intermediate group, as indicated by the number of words (674 vs. 543). The shorter length was likely a result of the specificity of the task which did not give students much room for elaboration and a higher level of interactiveness as opposed to the other tasks that were more content-based, which naturally led to less use of ideational markers than for the other tasks. As expected, there were many tokens of markers indicating cause-effect relations (i.e. *so, because, for*) for both the intermediate (token=15) and advanced groups (token=14).

Table 4.20. *Use of Cause-effect Markers by Proficiency Level Across Tasks*

		Narration	**Description**	**Comparison**	**Opinion**	**Hypothesis**	**Apology**
I	Token	11	8	15	10	8	**15**
	Proportion	0.17	0.10	0.14	0.11	0.20	**0.45**
A	Token	9	11	9	8	8	**14**
	Proportion	0.15	0.16	0.07	0.11	0.18	**0.33**

The use of connectives marking causal relations was more characteristic of this task than the other tasks, as predicted. Table 4.20 compares the use of such markers across all six tasks. It suggests that both the intermediate and advanced groups used more such markers for the apology task than for any other tasks. Meanwhile, for this task, these markers had the highest proportion in relation to all ideational markers for both proficiency groups (ratio= 0.45 for the intermediate group, 0.33 for the advanced group).

Individual Variation

Specifically, as shown in Table 4.21, all intermediate and advanced students except intermediate students I-5, I-8 and advanced student A-3 used inferential or

causative devices to mark causal relations. Complete apologies made by intermediate student I-9 and advanced student A-6, who ranked first in their respective proficiency

Table 4.21 *Ideational Markers Used by Individual Students for Apology*

Intermediate				**Advanced**			
Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-9	0.94	3: and(1) so(2) because (1)	4	**A-6**	1.11	6: so(3) and(1) but(1) when(1) before (1) if(1)	8
I-5	0.85	3: and(2) but(1) so(1)	4	**A-8**	0.79	2: and(4) so(1)	5
I-1	0.85	3: and(4) but(1) because(1)	6	**A-5**	0.76	3: and(3) but(1) so (1)	5
I-4	0.60	3: because(1) so(1) and(1)	3	**A-4**	0.71	3: and(2) so(2) because (1)	5
I-10	0.58	2: but (1) so(2)	3	**A-7**	0.63	3: and(1) so(1) when(1)	3
I-6	0.58	2: and(2) so(1)	3	**A-3**	0.58	3: and(2) but (1) when (1)	4
I-2	0.54	2: and(3) so (1)	4	**A-10**	0.47	2: and(2) so(1)	3
I-3	0.53	2: and(1) because (1)	2	**A-1**	0.44	2: and(3) so(2)	5
I-7	0.53	1: for(2)	2	**A-2**	0.39	3: and(1) so(1) for (1)	3
I-8	0.36	2: but(1) when(1)	2	**A-9**	0.30	2: and (1) but (1)	2

groups both in terms of occurrence ratio and variety, are provided below to illustrate the use of connectives in signaling causal relations.

Intermediate Student

[4.46] *Hello, is, is Jenny here? I, I'm so-. I'm sorry to apologize for not come to the dinner on the time, because I have a lesson, I have a lecture that gives by my professors. So it, it lasts so long, so I don't have time to give you the message. I'm sorry for, for make you wait so long time. And, um, that's all. Thank you. And I—* (Student I-9)

Advanced Student

[4.47] *Hi, Jim, um, I'm very sorry that I have a meeting that post-, that, that last very late, be, becau-, before I realize it. So I, I'm late for our dinner, so, um, I'm terribly sorry. I just wanted to inform you, but you are not home. So could you contact me, if it is convenient for you? And maybe we could have some dinner the other day when we are both available. OK? Bye-bye.* (Student A-6)

There were two uses of *so* and one use of *because* in [4.46] and three uses of *so* in [4.47]. In [4.46], intermediate student I-9 first used *because* to mark the reason for missing the dinner. Then there were two instances of *so* in a row, both in the past tense frame. Use of *so* generally implies that its hosting utterance is a result of the preceding utterance; however, its first instance in *so it, it lasts so long* in [4.47] was somewhat confusing because it was not clear how the fact that she had a lecture given by her professors could logically lead to the fact that it lasted long. Immediately after that, the student used another *so* to mark the result of not telling her friend earlier about not being able to come.

In short, the two instances of *so* in this response were either misleading or placed between short discourse spans.

In [4.47], advanced student A-6 also had multiple use of *so* in her apology. After giving the reason, she used *so* to mark the consequence in the past temporal frame that she was late for the dinner. Then immediately she used another *so* to introduce the present act of apology; her third use of *so* marked the request of her friend to contact her as a reasonable result of the prior message that her friend was not home. Therefore, student A-6 employed *so* to transit smoothly from the past to the present and from the present to the future. She not only provided logical connections between ideas contained in her utterances, but also established links among what already happened, the current act of apology and request of a future act, and shifted the participation responsibility to the hearer regarding the accomplishment of a requested act. Although the three instances of the word were more closely placed in the response than the responses of other advanced students we have examined so far, compared to intermediate student I-9, this advanced student was more skillful in using reasoning to fulfill varied pragmatic purposes. This was important considering the nature of the task was inherently interactive, unlike the other task functions that asked for transmission of information.

Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that this advanced student also invoked several other ideational markers (i.e. *before, if, when*) to mark subordinations of meanings. The temporal marker *before* foregrounded the meeting and backgrounded the student, which implied that it was the running-late meeting to blame, not the student. Her use of *if* that introduced the clause *it is convenient for you* hedged her request by specifying the condition for the expected act to take place. Lastly, another temporal marker *when* in

when we are both available also saved the face of the hearer by specifying the condition for the proposed make-up dinner to take place. Therefore, the use of ideational markers organized this apology in such a way that indicated more interactiveness with the hearer than the apology made by intermediate student I-9 in [4.46].

The successive use of *so* at such a close interval as in [4.46] to mark past logical sequence was also found in the apology of intermediate student I-10, which is provided in full as follows.

Intermediate Student

[4.48] *Hi, I'm, I'm, Jenny. I was so sorry I miss the dinner appointment. Um I must apologize for you. <u>But</u> there's some emergency happen to me. One of my best friend, uh, was broken his leg, so I must take him, <u>so</u> I must take him to hospital. <u>So</u> I miss the appointment. Sorry.* (Student I-10)

Intermediate student I-10 used *so* twice consecutively linking immediately adjacent utterances. Like intermediate student I-9 in [4.46] who also used *so* repeatedly, she used this word twice to mark inferential relations among three past events (i.e. a friend's leg was broken, she took him to hospital, and she missed the appointment), with each *so* connecting two short utterances. This simple logical sequence signaled by this word in these two intermediate students' responses was consistent with the dependence on temporal markers to indicate temporal sequence for the narration and hypothesis tasks discussed earlier, unlike advanced student A-6 in [4.47] who used this word for explicit interactive purposes in her apology.

The other two advanced students (A-1 and A-4) who used *so* twice in a row did not organize their apologies as sequentially as the above intermediate students I-9 and I-10 either. Their complete responses are as follows.

Advanced Students

[4.49] *Hey, honey. I am really sorry that I missed your party. I know it's very very bad. But I had to say that during the way, there's a very, the traffic is paralyzed, and I could not get to there. And you know, you know, the traffic in Beijing is really terrible and paralyzing. So when I got there, I found so many people they are leaving. I really don't know whether it's comfortable to just go there and say hi. So I just turn back to my home, to my house. I think whether we will make another time tomorrow, will be OK. Thank you. And could you, could you please forgive me?* (Student A-1)

[4.50] *Hi, I'm very sorry I can't make it to have dinner this evening. Um, because I must, my teacher, my teacher just called me, and she told me that there was some problem in my graduate paper. So I need to revise it. It's very urgent; I can't say no to my teacher. So please forgive me. And maybe we can make it next time. Have a good night. Bye bye.* (Student A-4)

In [4.49], which was a long apology, neither use of *so* was inserted between two past events. The first *so* did not occur until the student appealed for the hearer's sympathy by emphasizing it was generally known that the traffic was bad in Beijing. Before the

second use of *so*, the student gave the reason for her decision of not showing up, which better prepared the addressee for the consequence that she was absent. Similarly, in [4.50], between the two uses of *so*, advanced student A-4 not only explained the result of her teacher's call, but also emphasized the fact that it was an urgent situation and the norm that one was not expected to refuse to do what was asked by a teacher, which could contribute to a better understanding of her situation on the part of the addressee. These three instances of *so* in [4.49] and [4.50] all linked larger discourse units than it did in the above responses of intermediate students I-9 and I-10. The second use of *so*, like the second *so* in the apology [4.47] by advanced student A-6, marked a shift from the past account to the present act, in this case of a request for forgiveness. Overall, the above comparisons indicated that the advanced students were more skillful and active than the intermediate students in gearing the use of ideational markers towards their interactive needs through expressing social relations and personal attitudes. This discrepancy was probably the cause for the higher overall occurrence ratio of ideational markers for the advanced group than for the intermediate group, which was contrary to all other tasks for which the intermediate group had higher ratios than the advanced group.

In short, in spite of the lack of significant difference between intermediate and advanced students in frequency and variety of ideational markers, we have seen that there were both similarities and differences in the use of ideational markers for apologies between intermediate and advanced students. On the one hand, both intermediate and advanced students tended to use lexical devices marking cause-effect relations, which was expected since the task required an explanation of the reason for being absent. More importantly, there were suggestions that advanced students were likely to give more

detailed explanation and use causative *so* to signal pragmatic transitions, while intermediate students have been shown to use the word to connect events that were factually sequential. Advanced students have also been shown to use ideational markers to relate personally to the addressee for specific pragmatic effect. Overall, advanced students showed more signs of being able to cater their use of ideational markers to their intended interactive purposes.

Summary

The above findings suggest that use of ideational markers relates to one's proficiency level in complex ways. With regard to overall use, there was no apparent difference between the two proficiency groups. Intermediate and advanced students showed a similar reliance on certain ideational markers, which was suggested by the fact that *and*, *but*, *also* and *so* were the most frequently used ideational markers for both proficiency groups in the same descending order in terms of occurrence ratio per 1000 words. Furthermore, advanced students did not have a significantly higher occurrence ratio of ideational markers than intermediate students as previously hypothesized.

In regard to variety of ideational markers, advanced students did not, as predicted, exceed intermediate students significantly either. Analyses of individual variation also suggested that a greater variety of ideational markers is not necessarily indicative of higher speaking proficiency. Specifically, both similarities and differences existed in the use of various categories of ideational markers between intermediate and advanced students. A common trend was that elaborative and contrastive markers stood out as the most often used types of ideational markers for both proficiency groups while conditional

and topic markers had the least occurrences for both groups. This was consistent with the above finding that *and, also, but* were the most heavily used for both proficiency groups, the first two of which are elaborative markers and the third contrastive marker. However, overall intermediate students had a significantly heavier use of temporal markers than advanced students.

The above general findings were reinforced by the statistical analyses of ideational markers for various task functions. The medians of occurrence ratio of intermediate students for all tasks except hypothesis and apology were higher than those of advanced students and the variety medians were higher than those of advanced students for narration, description and opinion. However, there were no significant differences in either frequency or variety of ideational markers for all six selected tasks (i.e. description, apology, comparison, narration, opinion and hypothesis).

Qualitative analyses revealed both similarities and differences in the way ideational markers were used by intermediate and advanced students for the six tasks. With regard to the task of narration, both groups often used lexical devices (i.e. *when, after*, *before*, *at last*) marking specific time or temporal sequences. Nevertheless, there were signs that intermediate students were more likely to organize their narratives sequentially through the use of temporal markers, while advanced students seemed able to arrange their answers in a logical hierarchy. Furthermore, the connective *at last* was used more smoothly as a coherent device by some advanced students.

As for the description task, the intermediate and advanced groups were similar in that there was less use of temporal markers than for the narration task; the temporal markers that occurred were mostly used to define a general situation. Meanwhile, *and*

was heavily used by both groups to add ideas, to a greater extent than for any other tasks. There was an instance of enumerator use in the intermediate group to signal idea divisions sequentially, while some advanced students were found to use ideational markers to emphasize points in more diverse ways. Furthermore, several sophisticated ideational markers were found in the responses of the intermediate group.

The comparison task and the opinion task had longer responses that generally contained a greater variety of ideational markers than the other task functions. There were also features that were associated with each of these two task functions. The comparison task elicited more frequent use of ideational markers than any tasks for both proficiency groups. As expected, contrastive markers occurred more frequently for this task than all other tasks, to contrast two aspects of one place or the same aspect of two places. Furthermore, some advanced students have been shown to use ideational markers, particularly topic markers and numerics for larger discourse units than the intermediate student who used the ideational markers with the greatest frequency and variety in the intermediate group.

For the task of expressing opinions, several ideational markers (i.e. *on the other hand, for example*) that were not used for other tasks were seen in the answers in both the intermediate and advanced groups. *At the same time* was found in the responses of two intermediate students. However, advanced students were shown to use ideational markers to build a hierarchical structure of ideas while there was suggestion that intermediate students used them between much shorter spans. It was also worth mentioning that an advanced student used *also* at the beginning of her response to relate to the prior

utterance produced by the speaker on the VOCI, which enhanced both ideational and interactional coherence.

As to the hypothesis task, a common feature for the intermediate and advanced groups was the use of *first* to mark the beginning of the sequence of possible actions, which was expected since the task involved an account of hypothesized actions. Nevertheless, advanced students tended to use various ideational markers in such a way that different levels of structure were marked which gave better support for the actions to take place, while intermediate students showed a much stronger tendency to use sequence markers to string possible future actions sequentially, which was consistent with the sequential organization of the narrations of intermediate students and the use of enumerators in the response of one advanced student to the description task.

The last task of apology elicited the shortest answers for both proficiency groups. Both groups used lexical devices to mark cause-effect relations, which was expected because the task asked for an explanation of the reason. On the other hand, advanced students have been shown to give more elaborate explanation and use *so* to provide both ideational connection and pragmatic transition, unlike intermediate students who used it to signal factual sequences for minor idea divisions. Some advanced students also involved the intended addressee into their act of apology through the use of *so*. There were also some signs that advanced students used ideational markers to give more elaborate explanation and relate personally to the addressee. Therefore, advanced students generally seemed better able to use ideational markers more effectively to accomplish the interactive apologetic act of apology.

In sum, these results indicated that although there were similarities in the use of ideational markers between intermediate and advanced students both in general and for various types of tasks, these two proficiency groups did show important differences in specific ways ideational markers were used to structure responses. There was a large amount of evidence suggesting that advanced students were able to structure their responses in a more hierarchical and logical way, while intermediate students tended to use ideational markers sequentially and for more minor boundaries. Furthermore, advanced students could even use ideational markers interactively, as shown by the analyses with the apology task and the instance of *also* in the response of an advanced student to the opinion task. Therefore, different proficiency levels may lead to different use of ideational markers under different conditions. These results will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six. The following section will report the results of the analyses on the use of interactional markers.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS OF INTERACTIONAL MARKERS

This chapter will first examine the overall use of interactional markers; it will then report the analyses of interactional marker use in different contexts.

Overall Use of Interactional Markers

We can see in Table 5.1, which provides all interactional markers used by intermediate and advanced students respectively in descending order of occurrences, that the use of advanced students overall apparently outnumbered that of intermediate students in both raw occurrence (310 vs. 206) and occurrence ratio per 1000 words (0.205 vs. 0.141) per 1000 words. Their use also exceeded that of intermediate students in the number of types of ideational markers (11 vs. 8). The low variety for both proficiency groups and the small difference between them was probably due to the limited number of interactional markers on the inventory list, as compared to the open taxonomy of ideational markers. Interestingly, there were striking similarities in the choice of interactional markers between intermediate and advanced students. The top four interactional markers for both proficiency groups were identical, i.e. *I think, well, yes/yeah* and *you know*. In particular, *I think* was used with much greater frequency than

other interactional markers for both the intermediate (ratio=0.104) and advanced groups (ratio=0.117).

Table 5.1. *Interactional Markers Used by Intermediate and Advanced Students*

Intermediate Students			**Advanced Students**		
Interactional Marker	**Number of Occurrences**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Interactional Marker**	**Number of Occurrences**	**Ratio (‰)**
I think	120	0.104	I think	163	0.117
yeah/yes	11	0.010	well	53	0.038
well	11	0.010	yes/yeah	30	0.022
you know	9	0.008	you know	14	0.010
please	4	0.003	please	6	0.004
actually	3	0.002	OK	5	0.004
oh	3	0.002	I mean	4	0.003
I mean	2	0.002	actually	3	0.002
			oh	3	0.002
			anyway	2	0.002
			now	1	0.001
Total interactional markers	**163**	**0.141**	**Total interactional markers**	**284**	**0.206**

The occurrence ratio median of advanced students (median=0.19, range=0.22) was also higher than that of intermediate students (median=0.15, range=0.29). A Mann-Whitney *U* test was computed to compare the occurrence ratio of interactional markers between students at the intermediate and advanced levels. The result was insignificant, z=-1.51, p>.05. This showed that there was not a significant discrepancy in the occurrence ratio of interactional markers between intermediate and advanced students either, which did not confirm the initial hypothesis that advanced students would use interactional markers more frequently. Table 5.2 presents the occurrence ratios of students who were in the higher half in interactional marker occurrence ratio, i.e. students whose occurrence ratios of interactional markers per 1000 words were higher than the

ratio median (median=0.16) of all twenty participants. There was an obvious skew to advanced students. Eight of the ten students who belonged to the higher half in interactional marker frequency were at the advanced level; only two were at the intermediate level. This distribution suggested some tendency for the use of interactional markers to be greater in the responses of advanced students.

Table 5.2. *Distribution of Students who were in the Higher Half in Interactional Marker Occurrence Ratio*

Rank	**Interactional Marker**	
	Ratio(‰)	**Proficiency**
1	.31	advanced
2	.29	intermediate
3	.26	advanced
4	.25	advanced
5	.24	intermediate
6	.21	advanced
7	.20	advanced
8	.18	advanced
9	.18	advanced
10	.17	advanced

With regard to variety, a Mann-Whitney *U* test was also computed to compare the number of types of interactional markers between intermediate and advanced students. The test was significant, $z = -2.08$, $p < .05$. Advanced students had a median of 5, higher than intermediate students who had a median of 3. This indicated that advanced students used a greater variety of interactional markers than intermediate students. This confirmed the hypothesis that more advanced students would use a greater variety of interactional markers than less advanced students. Table 5.3 shows that there were more advanced students (n=8) than intermediate students (n = 3) among students who were above or the same as the overall variety median of 4. Overall, there was a general tendency for

advanced students to use a greater variety of interactional markers than intermediate students.

Table 5.3. *Distribution of Students who were in the Higher Half in Interactional Marker Marker Variety*

Rank	**Interactional Marker**	
	Type	**Proficiency**
1	7	advanced
2	6	advanced
2	6	advanced
2	6	intermediate
3	5	advanced
3	5	advanced
3	5	advanced
3	5	intermediate
4	4	advanced
4	4	advanced
4	4	intermediate

In order to illustrate the discrepancy in interactional marker variety between intermediate and advanced students, let's consider the following complete answers to the task of talking about one's future plans by an intermediate and an advanced student who were at the variety median of their respective groups.

Intermediate Student

[5.1] *Um, after my graduation, I want to, begin my career. Um Just I want to work in, I, I want to work in P& G, the company, the big corpora-, global corporation. Um, I think it's, it has the train-, the best, it has the best for the training system. So I can receive the best, um, the most, the most, the most suitable trainings. After work, work for ten years, to five years, I want to buy a car to travel around.* (Student I-7)

Advanced Student

[5.2] *Well, I think I also have a very clear goal. I will, I want to be an interpreter, um, when I, an interpreter in the future. Yes. First, I will try my best to, to take the, I will take the exam, and hopefully I can be enrolled in UIBE. Then, I will spend my two years in the academic study of interpretation. Hopefully, I can, um, I can take some kind of part time jobs, concerning interpretation. And, I want to, I want to, my biggest, my ultimate goal is to become an interpreter for UN, or EU. Yes, I, I know that, it's a very big dream, and maybe it's very difficult to accomplish it. But who knows. If I don't try, if I don't even try, I don't have the chance to make it.* (Student A-4)

Advanced student A-4 (ratio =0.29) had a much higher occurrence ratio of interactional markers than intermediate student I-7 (ratio =0.13). Intermediate student I-7 used only one interactional marker, i.e. *I think* in [5.1], while advanced student A-4 used a greater variety of interactional markers in [5.2] which included *well*, *yes* in addition to *I think*. *Well* in [5.2] performed a transitional and interpersonal function in response-giving and floor-taking, and the two uses of *yes* confirmed what was just said. This varied use of interactive markers served affective and social functions and contributed to the liveliness and naturalness of speech, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following section in terms of their use in different contexts.

To sum up, intermediate and advanced students showed similar patterns in the use of interactional markers in that they both tended to use certain interactional markers more often than others. This was consistent with the lack of significant statistical differences in

the occurrence ratio of interactional markers between the two groups. On the other hand, there was some tendency for advanced students to be greater in interactional marker use than intermediate students. Also, advanced students tended to use significantly a greater variety of interactional markers than intermediate students. Since interactional marker use may vary with context, the following section will examine the use of interactional markers in relation to the three types of context specified in Chapter 3, i.e. interview instruction, recorded message and apology, which increased in interactive level.

Task Contexts

This section will present the results regarding the three types of context (i.e. interview instruction, recorded message, apology) respectively. Frequency and variety of interactional markers will be examined for each type of context. In addition, the context of interview instruction will also be discussed with regard to the use of interactional markers at turn boundaries and within turns.

Interview Instruction

This type of task required students to provide information related to the given topic. Mann-Whitney *U* tests were conducted to compare the occurrence ratio of interactional markers per 1000 words and the variety between intermediate and advanced. The tests were significant for both the occurrence ratio (z=-2.27, p<.05) and variety (z=-2.02, p<.05), suggesting that advanced students were significantly higher than intermediate students in both occurrence ratio and variety. The medians for occurrence ratio and variety of the advanced group (ratio median=0.205; variety median=4) were

higher than those of the intermediate group (ratio median=0.125; variety median=3). Therefore, when students were asked to provide topic-related information, advanced students overall used interactional markers more frequently than intermediate students; they also used more types of interactional markers than intermediate students.

As the tasks grouped into this type of context may involve turn management considering the VOCI was a simulated interview, interactional markers will be examined separately regarding their use in marking the boundaries of their turns and their use within turns.

Turn Boundaries

As there were ten tasks in this category and ten students in each proficiency group, there were a total of 100 responses in each proficiency group. Therefore, the number of turn-initial occurrences of interactional markers indicated the number of times responses were marked turn-initially out of the 100 responses; in other words, it amounted to the percentage of responses marked turn-initially. Similarly, the number of turn-final occurrences of interactional markers represented the percentage of responses in each proficiency group for which interactional markers signaled the end.

A Mann-Whitney *U* test was conducted to compare the occurrences of boundary marking interactional markers (i.e. interactional markers used to take and end turns). The result was significant, $z = -2.17$, $p<.05$. Advanced students (median=5) had a higher variety median than intermediate students (median=2.5). Therefore, advanced students used interactional markers more frequently than intermediate students to mark the boundaries of their responses.

Table 5.4. *Summary of Interactional Markers Used to Mark Response Boundaries for Interview Instruction*

Proficiency	Turn-initial	Turn-final
Intermediate	*well*(11), *yes/yeah* (5), *oh* (3) **Total occurrences: 19**	*Yes/yeah*(4) **Total occurrences: 4**
Advanced	*well* (36), *yes/yeah*(6) **Total occurrences: 42**	*Yes/yeah*(15), *OK*(3) **Total occurrences: 18**

Table 5.4 summarizes the interactional markers used by the intermediate and advanced groups to take turns and end turns. It shows that the advanced group marked response boundaries much more often than the intermediate group. It took turns with interactional markers 42 times; that is, the beginnings of 42% of the responses were marked with interactional markers. The intermediate group marked their turn taking only at a rate of 19%. As for the end of turns, they were marked at a rate of 18% by the advanced group, and only 4% by the intermediate group. On the other hand, there was not much difference in the type of markers used for boundary marking. Both proficiency groups mostly used *well* and *yes/yeah*. In addition, the intermediate group had three uses of *oh* for the beginning and the advanced group had three uses of *OK* for the end of turns. Table 5.5 summarizes interactional markers used to take and end turns by each intermediate and advanced student in descending order of occurrences. The occurrences of interactional markers could be understood as the percentage of responses marked, as explained earlier. The turn-initial and turn-final use of these markers will be analyzed in greater detail separately in the following two separate sections by referring to Table 5.5.

Table 5.5. *Turn-initial and -final Interactional Markers Used by Individual Students for Interview Instruction*

Intermediate				**Advanced**			
Stu.	**Turn-initial**	**Turn-final**	**Total**	**Stu.**	**Turn-initial**	**Turn-final**	**Total**
I-1	yes/yeah(3) well(2)	yeah(1)	6	**A-6**	well(7)	yes (6)	13
I-10	well(5)	0	5	**A-1**	well(8)	yes/yeah(2) OK(2)	12
I-4	oh(2) yes(1) well(1)	0	4	**A-8**	well (8)	0	8
I-9	0	yes/yeah(3)	3	**A-4**	well(4) yes(2)	yes(1)	7
I-8	well(3)	0	3	**A-2**	yes/yeah(4)	yes(2)	6
I-7	oh(1) yeah(1)	0	2	**A-5**	well(4)	0	4
I-3	0	0	0	**A-9**	well (3)	yeah(2)	5
I-2	0	0	0	**A-7**	well(2)	0	2
I-5	0	0	0	**A-3**	0	yeah (2)	2
I-6	0	0	0	**A-10**	0	OK (1)	1
Total	**19**	**4**	**23**	**Total**	**42**	**18**	**60**

Turn-Initial

The table shows that nine advanced students and only five intermediate students used lexical devices to mark their turn taking. Moreover, the turns were marked with much greater frequency (43 times) for the advanced group who used *well* or *yes/yeah*, than for the intermediate group (19 times) who used *well*, *yes/yeah* or *oh*.

Well was the most heavily used turn-taking marker for both proficiency groups. In order to illustrate its use, the following pairs of excerpts were taken as examples from the responses of the intermediate and advanced groups.

Task 7: *Tell us about it [experience]*.

[5.3] *Well, one of , one of my most unforgettable experience is that, um, um, I was, I was, I was in charge, I was in charge, um, of a ceremony.* (Student I-10)

[5.4] *Well, the most favora-, the most unforgettable experience for me is, is last winter holiday, for I went back to my hometown.* (Student A-2)

Task 9: *Tell us why you think this is or isn't art.*

[5.5] *Well, I think, this is art.* (Student I-8)

[5.6] *Well, I don't know. Different people have different opinions. In my opinion, I don't think it's an art, kind of art.* (Student A-10)

Task 15: *How do you think this test compares to the other English tests you have taken?*

[5.7] *Well, I think, I think this test is, is lively, and we can see the people by myself.* (Student I-4)

[5.8] *Well, I, I've taken IELTS English tests, three years ago. I think compared to this one, IELTS oral, oral test is relatively easy.* (Student A-8)

Well in the above examples was used at the beginning of turns as a reception marker in response to the instruction given by the interviewer shown on the screen. Such turn-initial use of the word had a time-gaining effect, which indicated that a thinking process was going on. It helped the student take the floor promptly while making a decision as to what to say about the designated topic. In other words, as a time buying device, it denoted a transition from a mental state of uncertainty to availability of the expected type of

information. Therefore, the turn-initial use of *well* in the above examples showed the speaker's awareness of the need to be coherent at points where full harmony was not guaranteed, as explained by Schiffrin (1987). Particularly interesting were excerpts [5.5] and [5.6], where intermediate student I-8 and advanced student A-10 expressed their views on a painting. *Well* prefaced a positive view in [5.5] and a negative view in [5.6] towards the painting. In these two cases, in addition to being a delay device, it also had a face-saving effect by mitigating the force of assertion and softening the tone, since both standpoints ran counter to the opinion of one of the interlocutors on the VOCI (see Task 9 in Appendix B for task details). It signaled that the impending context may not be entirely relevant to the context set up on the VOCI. Overall, the turn-initial insertion of *well* performed important interactional functions. It was very common among advanced students and occurred in 35% of the answers of seven advanced students. There was much less use among the intermediate group, with only a total percentage of 11%, used by four intermediate students. This difference suggested that advanced students were more actively involved in the speech event, and more alive to the need to provide guidance at points where interactional coherence was otherwise at stake.

A less densely occurring turn-taking device was *yes/yeah* which was used by the advanced group for 6% of their responses and by the intermediate group for 5%. A closer look revealed that four of the five instances for the intermediate group could also be viewed as responses to the *yes/no* question preceding the request of narrating a past experience (see Appendix B for Task 7) and the request of comparing one's hometown with another place in the form of a question (see Appendix B for Task 5). In comparison, only three of the six uses of *yes/yeah* by the advanced group were for these two tasks.

The excerpts of the tasks that contained the questions and of the responses of these students are listed below.

Task 5: *Can you compare your hometown with a city that you visited or you know well?*

[5.9] *Yeah. I will compare my hometown Qingcheng, with Beijing.* (Student I-1)

[5.10] *Yeah. I have visited Taiyuan province, Taiyuan in Shanxi province.* (Student I-7)

[5.11] *Yes, my hometown is Handan. And the city I visited or I live now is Beijing.* (Student A-1)

Task 7: *That's true. Have you ever had an experience like that? Something that you'll never forget. It can be something positive or it can be something negative. Tell us about it.*

[5.12] *Um, yeah, I have, have one good experience in Beidaihe.* (Student I-1)

[5.13] *Yes, I have a experience that make me very hard, it very hard for me to forget it.* (Student I-4)

[5.14] *Yeah. The most favora-, the most unforgettable experience for me is, is last winter holiday.* (Student A-1)

[5.15] *Yes, it happened, it happened recently.* (Student A-4)

Although in the above instances *yes/yeah* could be considered a positive response to the request raised by the VOCI and a turn-taking signal, it was also possible that their emergence was imposed by the questions contained in the two tasks. Therefore, it can be argued that in these cases, *yes/yeah* was used passively more often by the intermediate

students to respond to grammatical context, rather than mark their interactive involvement.

In addition to the use of *yes/yeah* in the above excerpts in completing the adjacency-pair of question and answer, *yes/yeah* were also used spontaneously three times by the advanced group and only once by the intermediate group to react to the instruction posed on them as boundary-marking devices, as in the following excerpts.

[5.16] *Yes, I just said I come from Shanxi Province.* (Student I-1)

[5.17] *Yeah, I will also talk about computer.* (Student A-2)

[5.18] *Yes, honestly speaking, this type of test is the first one I have taken.* (Student A-2)

[5.19] *Yes, I think it is art.* (Student A-4)

These instances of *yes/yeah* acknowledged the reception of the task information and signaled the beginning of responses. The corresponding tasks only presented instructions regarding the topics students were required to talk about, unlike the above Tasks 5 and 7 that contained *yes/no* questions. Overall, this distinction in the use of *yes/yeah* between intermediate and advanced students suggested that advanced students were more likely to use them to signal their participation in the interaction while intermediate students used them more as affirmative answers to questions.

The only turn-initial interactional marker other than *well* and *yes/yeah* was *oh* which occurred in the response of intermediate students I-4 and I-7, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

Task 5: *Can you compare your hometown with a city that you visited or you know well?*

[5.20] *Oh, I grew up in a small village, so it is, it is very beautiful, because, because there is no industry, no, no company, so the air and the environment here there is very good.* (Student I-4)

Task: *How might your life look ten years from now?*

[5.21] *Oh, I seldom think it over, because there's a lot of uncertain things behind me.* (Student I-4)

Task 8: *Describe one of your friends.*

[5.22] *Oh, I have a lot of friends, and among them there is one that is very special.* (Student I-7)

According to Schiffrin (1987), *oh* is typically used when locally provided information is solicited but not anticipated by the speaker; it signals a shift of orientation to information. It can indicate strong emotional states. Like *well*, *oh* also marks the reception of information and indicates a shift of turn-taking responsibility in the exchange structure by showing the speaker's interactional presence (Schiffrin, 1987). In the above three excerpts, particularly the last two where *oh* prefaced *I seldom thought it over* and *I have a lot of friends*, the use of *oh* as a response to the given tasks probably suggested that the tasks were somewhat unexpected. Therefore, *oh* was used by the two intermediate students in a nonnative like way. There were only three occurrences among the few turn takings among intermediate students.

In spite of the above three instances of *oh* and some uses of *well* and *yes/yeah* we have just discussed, the majority of responses in the intermediate group (81%) were started with no presence of turn-taking devices. For example, the following excerpts were the beginning utterances of the responses to the tasks of describing one's hometown and a friend respectively.

[5.23] *My hometown is the capital of my, is the capital of China, Beijing.* (Student I-7)

[5.24] *My best friends now is studying in Jiangxi, Nanchang.* (Student I-8).

Compared to those that were marked turn-initially, the above turn taking was somewhat abrupt, suggesting that the students focused more of their attention to information giving, without relating to the context interactively by recognizing the reception of the task and marking the beginning of answers. The huge discrepancy of the proportion of responses with no turn-taking markers between the intermediate group (89%) and the advanced group (51%) was a sign that the advanced group was more capable of interacting with the given context in the simulated setting.

Overall, more use of interactional markers in turn taking suggested advanced students' higher level of interactiveness with the context than intermediate students who tended to start their responses directly with requested content, which made their responses more abrupt and monologic.

Turn-final

We can also infer from Table 5.5 that advanced students seemed to mark the end of their discourse more often. More advanced students (n=6) signaled the end of their responses than intermediate students (n=2). Overall, the advanced group did it for 15% of responses with *yes/yeah* and *OK*, while the intermediate group only did it for 5% of all responses with *yes/yeah*. The following excerpts which were the last few utterances of the responses are given to illustrate the use of these two words.

Intermediate Students

[5.25] *He's very kind to people, very kind to people. And he, he always treat me. Yeah.* (Student I-1)

[5.26] *I like, I like hometown very much, because it's very quiet and clean. Yeah.* (Student I-9)

[5.27] *They don't have so much relaxed, and because the, the city is bi-, so crowded, clouded, clouded. Yeah.* (Student I-9)

Advanced Students

[5.28] *And without it, our people have, maybe have not very distinctive difference with barbarians. Um, it really worked, makes a difference. Yes.* (Student A-6)

[5.29] *Also it can improve my oral skills. And I can examine what level my oral English is, is located at. Yes, I like this form of test and I hope I will have another chance to have text like this.* (Student A-2)

[5.30] *we must, we must be cautions, we must be aware of its shortage, or its harm. Yes, we cannot too, go too dependent on modern technology.* (Student A-4)

The above instances of *yes/yeah* all cued the end of the answers by setting up agreement with the speakers' own assertions. They provided an affirmation to the speaker's foregoing utterances and concluded the entire answer. In particular, in [5.29] and [5.30], this concluding function was reinforced by the accompanying utterances of *I like this form of test and I hope I will have another chance to have text like this* in [5.29] and *we cannot too, go too dependent on modern technology* in [5.30], which were general statements summarizing the major point of the answer. This combination of *yes/yeah* with a wrap and tie utterance made the end of the turn more evident and contributed to a more complete answer. This phenomenon was seen in 10 out of the 13 answers of four out of the six advanced students who used *yes/yeah* as end of turn signaling, and not seen in the response of any intermediate students. It should be pointed out here that the turn-final use of *yes/yeah* was possibly an effect of the context in which students were expected to respond to the informational nature of the task with no real presence of interlocutors.

Another particle used to end the turn was *OK*, a more common ender of spoken discourse, which was used in two of the responses of advanced student A-1.

[5.31] *And also I think generally Beijing is much drier and hotter, which I could not, what I could not say it. OK. Thanks.* (Student A-1)

[5.32] *You have to be honest to yourself. It is the most important thing for man to be a man. OK. Thanks.* (Student A-1)

Advanced student A-1 used *OK*, in conjunction with *thanks*, to signal the end of her answers politely. This particle was not used by any intermediate student.

Overall, we have seen that advanced students used interactional markers more frequently to take and end turns in reaction to tasks that asked for topic-related information. These lexical devices were used either to relate back to the interviewer or provided an affirmation to students' own statement and marked the end of the discourse sometimes by emphasizing their general viewpoints. They contributed to interactional coherence by marking discourse boundaries and showed that students were able to react personally to situations and manage their interactions with the context.

Turn-medial

Overall Use

The median of turn-medial interactional markers for the advanced group (ratio =0.13) was higher than that of the intermediate group (ratio=0.11), although the Mann-Whitney *U* test was insignificant z=-1.87, p>.05, suggesting a lack of significant difference in frequency. A Mann-Whitney *U* test was also run to compare the variety of interactional markers per 1000 words between intermediate and advanced students. The tests were significant, z =-2.62, p<.05, which indicated that advanced students used more types of interactional markers than intermediate students in the middle of turns.

Table 5.6 summarizes the use of interactional markers for the body of the responses. The advanced group (ratio = 0.11) had a higher occurrence ratio than the intermediate group (ratio=0.16). It (type =9) also used more types of interactional markers than the intermediate group (type=5). *I think* was densely used by both

Table 5.6. *Summary of Turn-medial* Interactional *Markers by Proficiency Level for Interview Instruction*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.11	10190 words	5: I think (113), you know (4), actually (3), I mean (2), yes (1)	123
Advanced	0.16	12092 words	9: I think (154), well (17), yes/yeah(8), you know (6), I mean (4), anyway(2), actually(2), now(1), oh (1),	195

proficiency groups. Since the context of interview instruction requested specific kind of information related to designated topics from students, the dependence on *I think* was expected which could signpost one's thinking process or commitment to their assertions. To illustrate the effect of context on the use of *I think*, Table 5.7 provides the proportion of occurrences of *I think* to overall occurrences of interactional markers across the three contexts under study. It indicates clearly that this context elicited greater proportions of *I think* than the other two contexts that were more interactive which will be examined in later sections. Meanwhile, the intermediate group had a higher proportion of this hedge than the advanced group (0.17 vs. 0.09).

Table 5.7. *Use of I think Across Contexts*

		Interview Instruction	**Recorded Message**	**Apology**
Intermediate	Token	113	6	1
	Proportion	0.91	0.55	0.17
Advanced	Token	154	8	1
	Proportion	0.79	0.42	0.09

The overwhelming use of *I think* in the intermediate group elevated its occurrence ratio of interactional markers, which gave rise to the suspicion that it was the cause for the above insignificant statistical comparison between intermediate and advanced

students. Therefore, another Mann-Whitney *U* test was run to compare the occurrence ratio of interactional markers with the exclusion of *I think* between the proficiency groups. The result was significant, z=-2.31, p<.05, suggesting that advanced students

Table 5.8. *Turn-Medial Interactional Markers Used by Individual Students for Interview Instruction*

Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-2	0.38	1: I think (47)	47	A-1	0.27	4: I think (35) well (11) oh(1) you know(1)	48
I-6	0.15	1: I think(11)	11	A-8	0.21	3: I think (14) I mean (1) well(1)	16
I-8	0.12	1: I think (14)	14	A-10	0.21	3: I think (24) I mean (1) actually (1)	26
I-7	0.12	2: I think(9)	9	A-3	0.21	2: I think (20)	20
I-9	0.11	3: I think (8) you know(3) yes(1)	12	A-6	0.13	3: I think (13) you know(2) I mean(1)	16
I-3	0.11	3: I think (7) actually(1) I mean(2)	10	A-9	0.13	2: I think (14) well(2)	16
I-4	0.07	2: I think (8) you know(1)	9	A-4	0.12	3: I think (13) yes(2) now(1)	15
I-1	0.06	2: I think(6) actually(1)	7	A-2	0.12	3: I think (8) yes/yeah(6) anyway(2) you know (1)	17
I-10	0.03	2: I think (2) actually(1)	3	A-5	0.11	4: I think (8) well(3) you know(2) actually(1)	14
I-5	0.01	1: I think (1)	1	A-7	0.07	2: I think (5) I mean (1)	6

were significantly higher than intermediate students in the frequency of interactional markers other than *I think*, which confirmed the suspicion.

Individual Variation

In regard to individual use, as Table 5.8 shows, *I think* was used either as the most frequent interactional marker for intermediate and advanced students, except for four intermediate students (i.e. I-2, I-6, I-8, I-5) and only one advanced student (i.e. A-3) who used *I think* as the only interactional marker in all their responses to the context of interview instruction. It was especially worth noting that in the responses of intermediate student I-2 who used interactional markers with the greatest frequency (ratio = 0.38) in the intermediate group, there was an excessive reliance on "*I think*", while advanced student A-3, who was the only one in the advanced group who used *I think* as the only interactional marker, used it much less densely (ratio =0.21). Their responses to the task of comparing two places are given below to illustrate this discrepancy.

Intermediate Student

[5.33] *I think I will compare my hometown with the place now I am living, Beijing. I think my hometown is a, I think it is a very traditional Chinese town. It is smaller than the Beijing Univer-, the capital of Beijing. And it's, the air in my hometown is clean than Beijing. And also the traffic, I think, is maybe, much better, much better than Beijing. And also the people in my hometown is very simple. He will offer their help to you as soon you need, you need it. But I think that's maybe little indifference, indifferent in Beijing. I, I think maybe because it's my hometown, I may*

feel warmer in there than in Beijing. But I, but I think there's also some development in Beijing, I think which my hometown can't match it. Beijing, um, is the capital of China, and so it, it developed in many element, including economic, cultural and something etc. So maybe I think maybe there are some, the level of development is di-, different of, is different. But I think one thing is the same. It's now, it's all one place of China, and I like both of them very much. And I think I will make a choice to, in the future to work, um— (Student I-2)

Advanced Student

[5.34] *I want to compare my my ci-, city, hometown, with the hometown of Beijing. And I have been studying in Beijing for almost two years. And the first time I came here, I, I, I felt that Beijing is a great city, and so big, and I often get lost, around the city. And the major difference between Beijing and my hometown is that Beijing is a more international country, international city. And it's very important in China. And it's, because it's the capital, and it is also the economic and political center of China, so I think Beijing is more international, and more global, globalized. As for my hometown, I think there's still, there's still room for improvement, because although, although my hometown is famous for its co-, coal, and, and its contribution to the international energy, there are still some, some, there's still some improvements to be, needs to be made, such as the, such as the problem of the unemployment, and the rising price of the house. But that is*

a common problems in, both in Beijing and my hometown. I think Beijing is more— (Student A-3)

Intermediate student I-2 used *I think* exclusively a total of ten times in [5.33], with an occurrence ratio of 0.47. She started most of her utterances with *I think.* It can be argued that too much use of the hedge *I think* in spoken discourse could indicate a high degree of hesitation and is possibly a sign of pragmatic fossilization, using Fung and Carter's term (2007). In comparison, advanced student A-3 used *I think* only twice, with an occurrence ratio of 0.11, much lower than that of intermediate student I-2. Therefore, the intermediate student depended much more heavily on *I think* as a hedging device than the advanced student and probably had a higher degree of pragmatic routinization.

Unlike intermediate student I-2 who had the highest occurrence ratio in the intermediate group and used only *I think*, advanced student A-1, her counterpart in the advanced group used more varied types of interactional markers, although I-2 (ratio=0.38) had a noticeably higher occurrence ratio of interactional markers than A-1 (ratio=0.27). To illustrate this distinction, the comparison response of advanced student A-1 is given below.

Advanced Student

[5.35] *Well, I want to compare the city that it is my hometown, Jilin province, in China city, also with the place I study, it's Beijing. Well, I think they are both important cities in China. They really have so, they really share some important, and common com-, common trends, just like the very, very fast traffic. And people they are very open. And also they have really very*

strong background by history. But I think what is im-, what is quite different is that the people in Changchun they really feel very, very relaxed. And they can enjoy life. But when you, when you live in Beijing, you will feel uncomfortable . They were so politics. And also, oh, I think they're also busy people. They are very fast paced in order to strive for their future. And also, maybe, maybe I can compare the students in college. In Changchun, the students in college, they will feel that they are not under stress. And they also strive for their future in every aspects. They will, they will fill themselves with so many knowledge. But in, but in Beijing, everyone has narrowed their view they will strive for, and very specified goal, which is very bad, very hard. And also I think that the people in Beijing and also in Changchun are not that kind of same. And people in my hometown is more kind. I'm really very unfortunate to say that. And also I think generally Beijing is much drier and hotter, which I could not, what I could not say it. OK. Thanks. (Student A-1)

In [5.35], four different interactional markers were used to attend to interactional demands. In addition to *well* and *OK* that were used to mark the beginning and the end of the response respectively, we can also find three types of interactional markers (i.e. *well, oh* and *I think*) within the response. The second *well* marked a divergence from the expectation from the foregoing utterance that the following utterance would be about be differences between the two places. There were nine more turn-medial instances of *well* in student A-1's responses. *Oh* was used to mark a sudden reaction to additional information relevant to the ongoing discussion; it was a clue that the speaker realized that

there was something else she would like to say about the people in Beijing when she was about to move on to a different topic. This use was not found in the response of any intermediate student. Compared to the comparison made by the above intermediate student I-2, this answer was obviously more lively and natural.

Well, which was found to be used frequently by advanced students to start their turns, was also used turn-medially six times by three other advanced students besides student A-1, i.e. students A-5, A-8, A-9 (see Table 5.8). Two excerpts are given below to illustrate its use.

Advanced Students

[5.36] *I really want to describe one of my friends, which I really feel deep-hearted. I have really very strong relationship with her. Well, we just established our relationship maybe, maybe one month ago. She's a very kindly and open girl.* (Student A-9)

[5.37] *And she just, whenever she had time, she just gave me a phone call and make sure that I am happy on that day. Well, I don't think friends need to contact much, but just when I want her, she's always there. So I am very thankful of her.* (Student A-5)

In [5.36], *well* was inserted between *I have really very strong relationship with her* and *we just established our relationship maybe, maybe a month ago*. It oriented the hearer to the speaker's divergence from the message contained in *I have really very strong relationship with her* ; advanced student A-9 probably realized that it was somewhat strange that people were so intimate when they just met a month ago. A similar function of *well* was found in [5.37]. Advanced student A-5 kept talking about how close she was

with her friend and how often her friend would call her. Then she used *well* that cued the addressee to the need for a reorientation of the interpretation of the upcoming utterance (i.e. *I don't think friends need to contact much*) as relevant in ways not fully compatible with the fact that *I have really very strong relationship with her*. Therefore, *well* in the above contexts was an important guide indicating to the hearer how to process the relevance of impending utterances.

Anyway and *now* were the other two interactional markers in addition to *well* and *oh* used only by the advanced group, not by the intermediate group. The complete response that contained *anyway* and the beginning part of the response that contained *now* are given below to illustrate their use.

Advanced Students

[5.38] *Yes. Honestly speaking, this type of test is the first one I have taken into, for before the tests I have taken into are always wri-, in the written form, isn't with oral form. Oral form is just taken very little portion of the whole part. So this kind of test is mainly through the whole process, always testing our oral practice. This is really very rare in my life, in my life of studying. Anyway, I like this sort of, of text, for it can practice my response to the questions with limited time. Also it can improve my oral skills. And I can examine what level my oral English is, is located at. Yes, I like this form of text and I hope I will have another chance to have text like this.* (Student A-2)

[5.39] *Well, I used to visit Dalian, which is also a coastal city in the east,*

northeast of China. Now, I will compare Dalian with the, with Beijing. (Student A-4)

In [5.38], advanced student A-2 used *anyway* to close digressions and adjusted her discussion from a comparison of different tests to her attitude towards this test. In [5.39], *now* was indexical in that it moved the discussion from a brief introduction to Dalian to the subsequent comparison between Dalian to Beijing. Therefore, both instances of interactional markers performed important discourse structuring functions by cueing to the hearer the direction of discourse development.

We have noted earlier that *yes/yeah* were used to take turns more often by advanced students than by intermediate students. They also occurred more frequently in the responses of advanced students (i.e. A-2, A-4) who used them in eight occasions in the middle of turns, while the intermediate group (i.e. I-9) only had one use of them. Excerpts of their responses are given below to illustrate the use of *yes/yeah* by these three students.

Intermediate Student

[5.40] *And I think there, he's really very happy. Yeah, I think, I hope that every people can treat the old people more well, more good. And, um, make him happy.* (Student I-9)

Advanced Students

[5.41] *But the disadvantage is that because the population is increasing in big cities, with the results that the po-, the pollution has been, yes, has been*

increasingly serious, and which is not healthy to, to our human beings. (student A-2)

[5.42] *I think my husband should be the boy I mentioned before. Yes, definitely, I believe in it.* (student A-2)

[5.43] *I think this experience told me that I need to be more considerate, yes, more thoughtful, not only think of myself, but also others.* (Student A-4)

[5.44] *And after that, I want to, I want to, my biggest, my ultimate goal is to become an interpreter for UN, or EU. Yes, I, I know that, it's a very big dream, and maybe it's very difficult to accomplish it.* (Student A-4)

Intermediate student I-9, and advanced students A-2 and A-4 used *yes/yeah* in the middle of their responses to affirm in advance the upcoming utterance in excerpts [5.40], [5.41] and [5.44] respectively. In addition, advanced students A-2 and A-4 also used them in [5.42] and [5.43] to point back to and emphasize what was just said. [5.40] was the only instance of turn-medial use of *yes/yeah* for the intermediate group, while there were six other instances for the advanced group in addition to the above four examples.

In short, in response to interview instructions, in addition to signaling the boundaries of their turns with interactional markers, as we have discussed earlier, advanced students also used a greater variety of interactional markers within their turns as signposts to the hearer regarding the relevance and the speaker's attitude to what they said. Statistical results also suggested that advanced students used interactional markers (not including *I think*) more often than intermediate students. This more active turn-medial use of interactional markers facilitated the hearer's understanding of how the upcoming information fit in the structure. In comparison, intermediate students used a

smaller variety of interactional markers. Although both proficiency groups used *I think* heavily and to a greater extent than for the other two contexts (i.e. recorded message and apology) probably due to the transactional nature of the tasks, the intermediate group had a much heavier use of it and a significantly less use of other interactional markers, which made their responses less interactive.

Recorded Message

Overall Use

Considering that this task specified a target addressee (i.e. a friend), it was more interactive and socially functional, compared to the above interview context that required students to provide topic-based information. This was confirmed by the fact that the majority of students (7 intermediate and 7 advanced students) started their responses by greeting their friends. Only one advanced student (i.e. Student A-6) treated this as an interview question because she used *well* to take the turn. Therefore, for this task, unlike the above analyses with interview tasks, distinction was not made between turn-initial, turn-final markers and turn-medial markers. Instead, interactional markers were compared as one category between the intermediate and advanced students. Meanwhile, it was expected that lexical devices that explicitly involved the hearer would be used since the task was somewhat interactive. Meanwhile, like the context of interview instruction, this task was also transactional in that students were asked to give a description of their life. Therefore, statement hedge *I think* was also expected to be seen, but not as frequently as for the interview instruction.

The occurrence ratio median of the advanced group (median=0.145) was higher than that of the intermediate group (median =0.055). However, the Mann-Whitney U test was not significant, z=-.59, p>.05, indicating that there was no significant difference in the frequency of interactional markers. With regard to variety, the median of the advanced group (median=2) was also much higher than that of the intermediate group (median=0.5), but the Mann-Whitney *U* test was not significant either, z=-.87, p>.05, which indicated that advanced students did not exceed intermediate students significantly in interactional marker variety.

Table 5.9. *Summary of Interactional Markers by Proficiency Level for Recorded Message*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.14	762 words	3: I think(6), you know(4), yes(1)	11
Advanced	0.16	1187 words	8: I think(8), OK(1), oh(1), you know(4), well(1), yes(2), please(1), actually(1)	19

As shown by Table 5.9, the advanced group had longer discourse than the intermediate group (1187 words vs. 762 words). Besides, five interactional markers (i.e. *OK, oh, well, please, actually*) used by the advanced group were not found in the discourse of the intermediate group. As expected, *I think* had fewer occurrences (6 for the intermediate group, 8 for the advanced group), in a much smaller proportion to all interactional marker occurrences for both proficiency groups (0.55 for the intermediate group and 0.42 for the intermediate group) than in the context of interview instruction (see Table 5.7). However, *you know* had a much higher proportion for both the intermediate group (0.36 vs. 0.03) and the advanced group (0.21 vs. 0.03) than in the previous context (see Table 5.10). This was consistent with the prior expectation that

interactional markers that involved the hearer would be used for this semi-interactive situation. The comparison of this marker with apology will be made later in the section on apology.

Table 5.10. *Use of <u>You Know</u> across Contexts*

		Interview Instruction	**Recorded Message**	**Apology**
Intermediate	Token	4	4	1
	Proportion	0.03	0.36	0.17
Advanced	Token	6	4	4
	Proportion	0.03	0.21	0.36

Table 5.11. *Interactional Markers Used by Individual Students for Recorded Message*

Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-2	0.34	2: I think(3) you know (1)	4	**A-10**	0.49	4: Oh(1) OK(1) I think (2) you know(1)	5
I-9	0.32	2: I think (2) yes(1)	3	**A-6**	0.30	3: well(1) you know(1) I think (2)	4
I-6	0.28	1: you know(1)	1	**A-9**	0.30	1: I think (2)	2
I-1	0.16	2: I think(1) you know(1)	2	**A-4**	0.25	3: you know(1) yes(1) please(1)	3
I-8	0.11	1: you know (1)	1	**A-2**	0.15	2: yes(1) I think(1)	2
I-3	0	0	0	**A-5**	0.14	2: you know (1) actually (1)	2
I-4	0	0	0	**A-7**	0.10	1: I think(1)	1
I-5	0	0	0	**A-3**	0	0	0
I-7	0	0	0	**A-8**	0	0	0
I-10	0	0	0	**A-1**	0	0	0

Individual Variation

We can see from Table 5.11 that more intermediate students (n=5) did not use any interactional markers at all than advanced students (n=3). For those who used interactional markers, one advanced student (A-10) used four types and two advanced students (A-6 and A-4) three types, while intermediate students used either one or two types. To illustrate this discrepancy in variety, the complete messages given by intermediate student I-2 and advanced student A-10, who ranked top in both occurrence ratio and variety in their respective proficiency groups, are provided below.

Intermediate Student

[5.45] *Hi, Mike. I am leaving to Qingdao now. Um, you know, this is a very beautiful city, and in 2008, there will have several sport games, Olympic Games in there. And now I will going to Qingdao province for a visit. And there lives some of my best friends. And recently I think the visit to Qingdao is the most, the most important things I, I should do. During this period, I think I will work hard for my lessons and take care the classmate who went there to take the examination. And also I will build his bodies, and because I didn't feel very well, and I think it, it more necessary for me to take more exercises.* (Student I-2)

Advanced Student

[5.46] *Um, hi, I am in the university, and after class, I will feel, I feel very boring. I'm very tired recently. I think I have a lot of classes to take. Um, my second major give me a lot of pressure. You know, the financial*

engineering is very difficult for a lot of subjects relate to advanced mathematics. I can't figure it out how the mathematics works. Oh, I think weekend, this weekend I will go outside to enjoy myself. For example, I will go to some shop to buy some clothes, and to go to some parks with my friends. OK, see you later, or call you later. Bye. (Student A-10)

Both students used *you know,* like six other intermediate and advanced students, to present the subsequent utterance as generally known to appeal for common ground. However, advanced student A-10 was higher than intermediate student I-2 in both occurrence ratio (0.49 vs. 0.34) and variety (4 vs. 2) of interactional markers. She used *oh* and *OK* which were not used by intermediate student I-2 in [5.45] who used *I think* as the only other interactional marker than *you know*. She was talking about her second major when she realized that she also wanted to tell the listener something else. Therefore, *oh* here marked a topic shift and cued to the hearer the upcoming utterance as an insertion of a suddenly-occurring idea that was not entirely relevant to what preceded. As for *OK*, it was used in the message before bidding good-bye to signal to the hearer her message was about to finish. Therefore, this varied use of interactional markers showed that this advanced student was better able to connect herself to the ongoing discourse and to the hearer than intermediate student I-2.

You know also occurred in the messages of six other intermediate (n=3) and advanced students (n=3). Excerpts from these students are given below.

Intermediate Students

[5.47] *Hi, Coco. I am Stephanie. I am living in the dormitory of my university, um, ~XX University, you know. And I'm very busy nowadays, maybe super busy with my studies, and my train-, training for the coming Olympic games.* (Student I-6)

[5.48] *And, um, you know students always do that, just study, and. Besides that, university students, they will make girl friends, or boy friends.* (Student I-1)

[5.49] *Now I'm, I'm sophomore, you know, um for English majors, sophomore year is the best year. Maybe we can say that.* (Student I-8)

Advanced Students

[5.50] *Dear friend, I'm now living in Beijing. And, and you know, I study in ~ XX University. I, currently, I am in the study of my university life. I'm quite enjoying it.* (A-4)

[5.51] *I, I'm preparing for my GMAT exam. You know, I want to go to America for my MA study.* (Student A-5)

[5.52] *Hi, Jim, well, you know, I have gone to, I have been been enrolled in the university, and I'm on the campus of ~XX University.* (Student A-6)

As we have noted in Chapter 2, *you know* performs two discourse functions: one is to set up a situation where a hearer is assumed to share with the speaker a particular piece of information being conveyed; another function is to mark what the speaker expects the hearer to share as something generally known (Schiffrin, 1987). As far as the

intermediate students were concerned, *you know* was used to signal what was assumed to be generally known in all cases except [5.48]. In comparison, it was used by all three advanced students in excerpts [5.50], [5.51] and [5.52] to suggest that the particular pieces of information involved about the speakers' life were believed to be shared by the hearers. This use of *you know* made the messages of these advanced students more personal than those of the intermediate students.

There were also uses of several other interactional markers that were peculiar to the advanced group: one instance of *please*, *well*, *actually* respectively. Excerpts are given below to show the specific use of them by advanced students.

Advanced Students

[5.53] *I want to become an interpreter in the future. Please tell me, um, your life in, your life now.* (Student A-4)

[5.54] *Recently I am not quite busy, actually, not as busy as I used to be.* (Student A-5)

[5.55] *Hi, Jim, well, you know, I have gone to, I have been been enrolled in the university, and I'm on the campus of ~XX University. And recently I have to do my best and work as I can to pass exam of TEM4.* (Student A-6)

In [5.53], advanced student A-4 used *please* to mark the transition in a polite way from a description of her life, to a request for information about the addressee's life, which got the addressee involved into her communicative act. In [5.54], *actually* was used by advanced student A-5 to cue the hearer to a digression or modification of her preceding utterance of *I am not quite busy*. As for *well* in [5.55], it was used somewhat vaguely. It

could be understood either as a framing device to introduce the topic of her university life, or as a reaction to the task prompt as a delay device indicating a thinking process. In either case, this word provided interactional coherence to the context. In general, it can be argued that using these markers suggested these advanced students were able to tailor their language use to situational considerations.

To sum up, this semi-interactive task elicited less use of *I think* and more use of *you know* for both proficiency groups. Although there was no statistically significant difference in either occurrence ratio or variety of interactional markers, there was still suggestion that advanced students may probably use a greater variety of interactional markers than intermediate students. Furthermore, there were differences in the specific use of interactional markers. *You know* was used more often personally to signal shared knowledge of particular pieces of information for the advanced group, while it signaled assumption of general common knowledge more often for the intermediate group. Also, there were interactional markers (i.e. *please, actually, well*) used only by advanced students. These interactional markers both helped advanced students signal to the hearer as to how to understand the way particular utterances were relevant to the context and involved the hearer into the discourse.

Apology

Overall Use

Although like the above task of recorded message, this task also asked students to give a message to a friend, the apology act was inherently more interactive. It not only involved a more concrete context, such as a previous happening (i.e. missing a dinner

engagement) and an immediate situation (i.e. the friend was not home when called); it also entailed a typical social purpose, i.e. to be forgiven by the hearer. Therefore, it was more interactive than the above two contexts. Accordingly, it was expected that this task would also give rise to more use of interactional markers that engage the hearer than the above recorded message context which was less interactive.

Although advanced students (median=0.15, range=0.30) exceeded intermediate students (median=0, range=0.28) in occurrence ratio median, the Mann-Whitney *U* test on occurrence ratio was not significant, z=-1.59, p>.05. Therefore, advanced students did not use interactional markers significantly more frequently than intermediate students. However, the Mann-Whitney *U* test conducted on variety was significant, z=-2.46, p<.05. The median of advanced students (median=1, range=2) was also higher than that of intermediate students (median=0, range=2). These results suggested that advanced students used significantly a greater variety of interactional markers than intermediate students for this interactive context.

Table 5.12. *Interactional Marker Use by Proficiency Level for Apology*

Proficiency	**Ratio** (‰)	**Length**	**Type**	**Token**
Intermediate	0.11	543 words	3: Please(4), I think (1), you know(1)	6
Advanced	0.16	674 words	4: Please(5), you know (4), I think (1), OK(1)	11

The above table (Table 5.12) provides the overall use of interactional markers for apology by proficiency level. It shows that like the other two contexts, this context elicited less frequent use of interactional markers from the intermediate group than from the advanced group (ratio=0.11 vs. 0.16). Both groups used a limited variety of

interactional markers (i.e. 3 types in the intermediate group and 4 types in the advanced group). Politeness marker *please* was the most often used for both groups (4 instances in the intermediate group and 5 in the advanced group), which was not present in the discourse produced in the other two contexts for the intermediate group and used only once by the advanced group for the recorded message task. There were more uses of *you know* by the advanced group than the intermediate group (4 vs. 1). As suggested by Table 5.10, the advanced group also had a much higher proportion of this marker to all interactional markers than the intermediate group (0.36 vs. 0.17). The advanced group had the highest proportion of it for this context, suggesting its greater sensitivity to the contextual need of appealing for sympathy.

This apology task elicited the least use of *I think* for both proficiency groups, indicated by the proportion of this marker to all occurrences of interactional markers (see Table 5.7). The interview instruction elicited much more use of *I think* for both groups, which may be the effect of their relatively lower level of interactiveness, as we have discussed earlier; the context made students focus more on information transmission, rather than getting them connected with the environment in other, more interactive ways. It is also worth mentioning that the advanced group was lower than the intermediate group for all three contexts in the proportion of *I think* to all interactional marker uses, which suggested less dependence of advanced students on this marker, therefore less level of routinization, compared to intermediate students, as pointed out earlier.

Table 5.13. *Interactional Markers Used to Make an Apology*

Intermediate				**Advanced**			
Stu.	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**	**Stu.**	**Ratio (‰)**	**Type**	**Token**
I-2	0.28	1: please	3	**A-9**	0.30	1: please	1
I-3	0.23	1: I think	1	**A-1**	0.28	2: please you know	2
I-4	0.18	1: please	1	**A-2**	0.27	2: please you know	2
I-6	0.14	1: you know	1	**A-10**	0.16	1: I think	1
I-1	0	0	0	**A-4**	0.16	1: you know	1
I-5	0	0	0	**A-6**	0.14	1: OK	1
I-7	0	0	0	**A-3**	0.14	1: please	1
I-8	0	0	0	**A-7**	0.13	1: please	1
I-9	0	0	0	**A-5**	0.10	1: you know	1
I-10	0	0	0	**A-8**	0	0	0

Individual Variation

Table 5.13 shows more than half of intermediate students (n=6) did not use any interactional markers while there was only one such advanced student (i.e. A-8). Therefore, in spite of the nonsignificant statistical result, intermediate students showed a weaker tendency than advanced students to use interactional markers when they made apologies.

With regard to specific interactional markers that occurred in students' apologies, four advanced students used *you know* while there was only one such intermediate student. These instances of this marker are given below in the excerpts of apologies.

Intermediate Student

[5.56] *I am terribly sorry to miss the date with you. You know, I am super busy with my study.* (Student I-6)

Advanced Students

[5.57] *But I had to say that during the way, there's very, the traffic was paralyzed, and I could not get to there. And you know, you know the traffic in Beijing is really terrible.* (Student A-1)

[5.58] *I am so sorry that I missed our date this evening. You know, I am now busy with my GMAT exam.* (Student A-5)

[5.59] *She [my teacher] told me that there was some problem in my graduation paper, so I need to revise it. It's very urgent; I can't say no to my teacher, you know.* (Student A-4)

[5.60] *Sophie's leg pains her a lot, and I had to take her to the hospital, you know.* (Student A-2)

You know in examples [5.56] and [5.58] uttered by intermediate student I-6 and advanced student A-5 respectively implied that the situation that the students were busy was a personal condition that the addressees had presumably known. The other three instances of *you know*, which were all produced by advanced students, were all attached to utterances whose meanings were believed to be consensual knowledge or norms, i.e. the traffic in Beijing was bad in [5.57], students were expected to obey the teacher in [5.59], and people should send friends who were ill to hospital in [5.60]. It was used differently in the above context of recorded message where the task was less focused and there was no background information other than the addressee being a friend of the speaker; therefore, it seemed more appropriate to use *you know* to present information as generally known knowledge there. This use of *you know* in the context of apology could be considered an attempt to appeal for the addressees' understanding of the situation the

speaker was in by highlighting the presented information as common knowledge. It seemed a feature more characteristic of the apologies made by advanced students.

Although another common feature of the discourse produced in this context as compared to the other less interactive contexts was the use of *please*, which was invoked to make polite requests, there were more uses of this word by five advanced students than intermediate students (5 vs. 2). All uses of this word are given in the following excerpts.

Intermediate Students

[5.61] *So please forget me, forgive me.* (I-2)

[5.62] *So, so please forgive me and I will call you, call you again.* (I-4)

Advanced Students

[5.63] *And could you, could you please forgive me?* (A-1)

[5.64] *Please forgive me.* (Student A-2)

[5.65] *Please call me when you are back, and let me know, let me know the, let me know the, the, the time for next meeting.* (Student A-3)

[5.66] *Please, could you please accept my apology?* (Student A-7)

[5.67] *Um, I do apologize; and please excuse me.* (Student A-9)

Intermediate students I-2 and I-4 and advanced students A-2, A-3, A-7 and A-9 all used *please* to preface their direct requests of the hearer to forgive them. In particular, advanced students A-1 and A-7 used please in a slightly different way. It was inserted into a more complicated form of request, i.e. a question, which was more polite as it saved the face of the hearer by making the fulfillment of the request optional and less obligatory. This use which was unique to the advanced group and the fact that more

advanced students then intermediate students used *please* in their apologies may probably suggest a higher level of interactiveness with the hearer of advanced students.

In short, both proficiency groups used context-specific markers (i.e. *please, you know*) to make apologies; there was also less use of *I think* than for the other two contexts (i.e. interview instruction and recorded message) that were less interactive. On the other hand, the above analyses suggested that compared to intermediate students, advanced students overall used a greater variety of interactional markers in their apologies; moreover, more advanced students used interactional markers in their apologies. In addition, more instances of *you know* and *please* in the advanced group, the use of *you know* for personal information, as well as the more sophisticated use of *please* in the apologies of some advanced students indicated that advanced students were probably more capable of resorting to discoursal devices to augment the effectiveness of their apologetic acts.

Summary

The analyses of this chapter indicated advanced students were both similar to and different from intermediate students in their use of interactional markers. Overall, *I think, well, yes/yeah, you know* had most frequent occurrences in both proficiency groups. There was also a lack of statistical difference between them in occurrence ratio. However, the higher median of the advanced group and the skew of the medians may probably suggest a stronger tendency of some students in the advanced group to use interactional markers. Meanwhile, advanced students were significantly higher than

intermediate students in variety of interactional markers, indicating that variety was a stronger indicator of proficiency level than frequency.

The discrepancy in interactional marker use between intermediate and advanced students was also reflected in the comparison for different contexts. Although Mann-Whitney *U* tests were not significant for occurrence ratio for the contexts of interview instruction and apology, and for the task of recorded message, the medians in these areas of the advanced group were much higher than those of the intermediate group. It was important to note that advanced students exceeded intermediate students significantly in occurrence ratio of interactional markers other than *I think*. Furthermore, advanced students were significantly higher than intermediate students in interactional marker variety for both interview instruction and apology; they also used interactional markers significantly more frequently than the latter for interview instruction. Overall, advanced students were more active in the use of interactional markers, particularly in terms of interactional marker variety.

The analyses also revealed that intermediate and advanced students both showed sensitivity to contexts in their use of interactional markers for the three types of tasks, i.e. interview instruction, cassette message and apology, which increased in interactive level. Both groups used *I think* most densely for the least interactive task of interview instruction and least often for the most interactive task of apology. On the other hand, they tended to use addressee-involving interactional markers for more interactive contexts. To be specific, they used *you know* less often for interview instruction and more for the more interactive tasks of recorded message and apology. *Please* was not present in

the responses to interview instruction and was used only once for recorded message and most often for apology.

Nevertheless, there were important differences in interactional marker use for these three types of context between the intermediate and advanced groups in addition to the statistical discrepancies mentioned above. For the context of interview instruction, advanced students marked the boundaries of their turns with interactional markers such as *well, yes/yeah* more frequently than intermediate students, while intermediate students tended to take and yield their turns in an unmarked way. Also, *yes/yeah* were used more interactively by the advanced group as a turn-taking device. Furthermore, advanced students also used more types of interactional markers in the middle of their answers to cue to the hearer their orientation towards their utterances while intermediate students relied on *I think* excessively. Some interactional markers were also present only in the responses of advanced students: turn-medial uses of *well, anyway, now, oh* for interview instruction; *yes, please, actually, well* for recorded message, *OK* for apology. Furthermore, there were higher instances of *please, you know* that are addressee-involving in the apologies of advanced students than intermediate students.

In short, advanced students were generally more active in interactional marker use than intermediate students to build interactional coherence, in spite of their shared patterns in overall and context-specific use. The following chapter will discuss these findings in greater detail and conclude the study by providing pedagogically related implications.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to examine whether proficiency level had an effect on Chinese learners' use of DMs. Ideational and interactional markers most frequently used in the corpus were identified and compared between intermediate and advanced students, both in terms frequency of use and variety. Also, use of ideational and interactional markers was compared between intermediate and advanced students across various task functions and contexts respectively. This chapter will discuss the results of the study presented in Chapters Four and Five; it also provides their pedagogical implications on the incorporation of DMs into English speaking classrooms to prepare learners to be more effective speakers of the target language; lastly, it explains the limitations this study has.

Conclusions of the Findings

Ideational Markers

The results indicated that overall intermediate and advanced students both tended to use certain ideational markers in their responses. In particular, *and, but, also, so* were the most often used for both the intermediate and advanced groups. A possible reason

was that these items mark basic ideational relations in spoken discourse. This is to a certain degree suggested by the consistency of this finding with that of Fung and Carter (2007) who found that *and*, *so* and *but* were the top three DMs for both their Hong Kong participants and native speakers.

No statistical differences were found between intermediate and advanced speakers in the occurrence frequency of ideational markers overall and for each individual task function. This suggests that occurrence and frequency of discourse devices cannot reliably distinguish the intermediate level and the advanced level for these tasks functions. Nor was variety of ideational markers suggestive of higher oral proficiency as previously expected.

Both similarities and differences existed between intermediate and advanced students in the way they marked various textual relations with ideational markers. The result that elaborative markers and contrastive markers ranked top among all categories of ideational markers conformed to the above result that *and*, *but* and *also* were used heavily by students at both proficiency levels; it was also in accordance with Fraser's (1999) major categories as well as Martinez's study (2004) which showed that Spanish participants used elaborative and contrastive markers frequently. The infrequent occurrence of topic markers was possibly an effect of the spoken mode which is in general transitory by nature. As discussed in Chapter Two, spoken discourse in its most general forms is usually less planned and edited than written discourse as a result of time and mental constraint; this is particularly the case with the VOCI, which does not give candidates preparation time. Clear organization is not even a property to be expected in the spoken interaction of native speakers. Therefore, it is neither desirable nor easy to

always give clear indications of topic change in unrehearsed speech that is not very extended. Another possible reason is that the topics were already designated by the tasks, which did not give rise to much need for topic change. On the other hand, the finding that temporal markers were more typically present in the corpus of intermediate students implied that intermediate students adhered to a greater extent to chronological parameters in speech organization. The example of the advanced student showed a more logical way of text building.

Such general findings were further supported by the quantitative and qualitative analyses of ideational markers used for specific task functions (i.e. narration, description, comparison, opinion, hypothesis and apology). The higher medians of intermediate students compared to advanced students for most of the task functions undermined the general assumption that greater frequency leads to better proficiency. Rather, qualitative analyses implied that specific use of ideational markers was more illuminating in uncovering the relationship between oral proficiency and ideational markers. On the one hand, both proficiency groups shared some features specific to task functions, such as longer discourse for comparison and opinion, shorter discourse for apology, as well as use of ideational markers specific to task functions, including temporal markers for narration, *and* for description, contrastive markers for comparison, use of *first* for hypothesis, causative/inferential markers for apology. On the other hand, there was repeated evidence that intermediate students tended to use ideational markers for minor discourse divisions, regardless of task functions. They also had a strong tendency to organize their spoken discourse sequentially through temporal pointers or sequence markers. This was consistent with the general finding that intermediate students used

temporal markers more often than advanced students. This may be a reflection of intermediate students' rigid reliance on concrete and sequential material when creating their text.

Advanced students have been shown to have structured their responses differently. We have seen that in addition to providing smoother transitions between utterances, advanced students were also able to organize their answers more logically for more major discourse divisions for various task functions than intermediate students. Also, they constructed multilayered meanings in a hierarchy. Ideational markers were used to impose patterns by structuring discourse at various levels, rather than merely denoting relationship between one utterance and another as intermediate students tended to do. These features were particularly noticeable for five of the six task functions (i.e. narration, description, comparison, opinion and hypothesis) which were largely transactional in that they required transmission of topic-related information and indication of text structure was important. Ideational markers were used by advanced markers more effectively as discourse organizers that facilitated the comprehension of the hearer by enhancing the top-down processing of meaning in speech. Furthermore, more complex ideational markers such as *whenever* and *particularly* were found in the responses of some advanced students, which were also facilitative in the construction of a hierarchical structure by providing highlights to the impending information. It is particularly interesting that *also* was used by an advanced student at the very beginning of the response, which not only helped build textual coherence but also contributed to interactional coherence.

As for the apology task, intermediate students also showed signs of using ideational markers sequentially over short discourse spans in their account of past experiences relevant to the task. In comparison, advanced students used ideational markers in ways different from what they tended to do for the other more information-based tasks. They structured their apologies more interactively by engaging the hearer and relating different speech acts (i.e. explanation, apology and request) through the use of some ideational markers (e.g. *so*). In other words, ideational markers were used less to manage factual information, more to maintain social interaction.

Overall, compared to intermediate students, advanced students used ideational markers to provide better guides for the hearer by helping them understand the relevance of particular utterances in the hierarchy of meanings for tasks that were more transactional, and to help fulfill social purposes for the more interactional task. Therefore, they seemed generally better able to use ideational markers more effectively to construct coherent spoken discourse.

Interactional Markers

There were similar choices of interactional markers between the intermediate and advanced groups. *I think*, *well*, *yes/yeah* and *you know* were the most commonly used interactional markers for both groups. This was also consistent with Fung and Carter (2007) who found that these lexical items ranked among the most frequent ones for their Hong Kong learners and native speakers.

Lack of statistical difference in the occurrence ratio of ideational markers also indicates that frequency of interactional markers does not relate directly to one's

proficiency level, although the higher occurrence ratio median of advanced students, along with the skew to those advanced students who ranked among the higher half in occurrence ratio of interactional markers, somewhat suggested that interactional markers were more characteristic of some advanced students. The significant difference in variety between the two groups suggests that variety may be a better predictor of speaking performance.

The findings regarding interactional marker use in the three contexts that were different in interaction level reinforced the general findings with more solid evidence. The occurrences of *I think* in the least interactive context of interview instruction, and *you know* and *please* in more interactive contexts of recorded message and apology for both proficiency groups indicated that both intermediate and advanced students could use context-specific lexical devices to serve particular interactional purposes. On the other hand, intermediate students seemed to use *I think* excessively and in a formulaic manner. Although *I think* is useful in that it softens the tone by reducing the level of commitment to utterances, too much use of it could be a result of pragmatic fossilization. More proficient students are more interactive with the context while less proficient students are more hesitant to commit to what they say and have a low confidence in their language control. Meanwhile, little use of other interactional markers than *I think* for the intermediate group in all contexts studied implied that compared to advanced students, intermediate students were less capable of using discourse strategies to manage communicative interactions; rather, they tended to communicate ideas in a more monological manner.

In comparison, the advanced group used more types of interactional markers for all three contexts and significantly for recorded message and apology; it also used interactional markers excluding *I think* significantly more often than the intermediate group. Some interactional markers were only seen in the responses of advanced students in specific contexts. These results suggest that advanced students could resort to discoursal devices to attend to situational needs. The greater instances of *please, you know* that involved the hearer into the ongoing communicative act indicate advanced students may be more skillful in managing the social and cognitive relationship with the addressee.

Use of interactional markers to signal discourse boundaries for the least interactive context of interview instruction was also more characteristic of advanced students. Advanced students marked the beginning of their turns through insertion of interactional markers such as *well, yes/yeah* and signaled the end of their turns using *yes/yeah* or *OK* more frequently than intermediate students who tended to take and yield their turns in an unmarked way. This showed that advanced students were better able to interact with the simulated context of interaction although the addressee was not present physically. Turn-taking is an important mechanism of interaction. Use of appropriate strategies in turn-taking made it clear to the hearer that the student had understood the message of the prior turn and was ready to take the turn. It committed students to their turns and cued the hearer when their speech was about to end. Occurrences of interactional markers at turn boundaries were particularly interesting in this study considering that in the context of the VOCI, no real interlocutors were available to converse with the students. It implied that compared to intermediate students, advanced

students perceived the context to be more communicative rather than simply as tasks to fulfill.

Therefore, this study in general indicates that use of interactional markers is more likely to be a feature characterizing the spoken English of more proficient students. Such differences between intermediate and advanced students are comparable to the distinction Ellis, Duran and Kelly (1994) make between high-involved and low-involved and speakers. The former are individuals who are more involved in the situation, sensitive to the flow of interaction, and can monitor the interaction more effectively, while the latter are those who are uncertain and "psychologically removed from the interaction" (p.146). Advanced students were comparatively speaking high-involved speakers who could invoke interactional markers to indicate their involvement in the context and displayed a better capability than intermediate students to respond to contextual demands and negotiate meanings.

General Conclusion

The discrepancy in ideational and interactional marker use between intermediate and advanced students in this study indicates that proficiency level does relate to the way DMs are used. This study also suggests that contextual variations affect ideational and interactional marker use across proficiency levels. It reveals that less proficient students are relatively more concerned with text-related issues; their spoken discourse attends more to the transactional aspect of communication. This study also shows that their effort of transmitting factual information is not necessarily effective in terms of the integration of discourse units since their ideational markers tend to be used at a more local level,

which could hinder rather than facilitate the hearer's comprehension, while more proficient students can invoke lexical devices to construct discourse that has a more hierarchical structure, and mark more major discourse divisions, which helps the hearer follow the direction of the discourse.

In addition to conveying information in an effective and organized way, it is also crucial for learners to be able to maintain interpersonal convergence in a way responsive to contextual needs. This constitutes an important facet of one's pragmatic competence, which is closely associated with the construction of coherent conversations. From this perspective, higher proficient students are more active communicators in that they are more likely to use various interactional lexical devices in their speech than intermediate speakers to manage spoken interactions and perform social functions by relating to their utterances and the hearer in different speech contexts, which enhances spontaneity in their speech. They are also more flexible in the use of ideational markers because they can invoke ideational markers to enhance the interactive relevance of their utterances. After all, as noted by Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992), more often than not, there is not as much need in oral communication for explicit cueing of distinct structural levels of content and transmitting factual information as in written discourse.

All in all, the study also led us to argue that it is too simplistic to treat frequency of ideational and interactional markers as the primary parameter of one's oral proficiency. It is a misconception that the more discourse markers, the better. Rather, we should also look at their variety and use in specific context. As far as ideational markers are concerned, they have to be used in a way that contributes to the building of textual coherence by providing useful signposts as to where the discourse is heading and how

each utterance fits in the overall discourse. They can also function interactively by pointing to the relevant context and relating various aspects of communication. In regard to interactional markers, they play a dynamic role in accomplishing more contextually bound coherence and perform the important function of maintaining a smooth interaction. The findings of this study also imply that competence in the use of interactional markers is especially closely related to one's speaking competence. It is hoped that by comparing the use of lexical coherence devices between speakers of different proficiency levels, we can get some useful insights as yardsticks in English teaching and learning.

Pedagogical Implications

Relevance of DMs to English Speaking Classes in China

Unlike those situations where learners acquire a language by speaking in a native speaking environment, English is a foreign language in China where learners have little exposure to the language outside the classroom, which constitutes a huge obstacle in their language learning endeavor. The overall limited speaking competence was also revealed to a certain extent by the oral proficiency of the English-major participants of this study, among whom only one-fifth managed to speak at the advanced level. It is logical to assume that the ratio of advanced speakers is even lower among non-English majors. This low proportion of advanced students also justified our attention to the issues exposed by the findings of this study which related to the differences in language use between speakers at different proficiency levels. At the same time, we have seen in this study students with intermediate proficiency, who represented the majority of the participants of this study, had rather limited competence in the use of DMs, which

suggests that as an important aspect of communicative competence, DMs are not easily picked up in a non-native speaking environment.

In addition to insufficient exposure to the learned language, foreign language learning settings in general are disadvantageous to the acquisition of DMs due to some characteristics of their classroom learning environment, as observed by some researchers. As noted by Muller (2005) and Trillo (2002), DMs have been generally neglected and have a low status in the foreign language teaching curriculum probably due to their low propositional content. A common problem is that there tends to be an unnatural linguistic input in English classes. As Burns points out (1998), many materials used for speaking classes are "at the least, less than appropriate, and often misleading and disempowering" in that they do not provide learners with "depictions of conversational data or with effective strategies for facilitating spoken communication in English" (p.106). Language functions are often introduced in scripted language samples. These materials tend to be overly well-formed, standardized, isolated, decontextualized and unnatural, which does not always reflect authentic use of the language in the real world. As a consequence, learners do not have sufficient access to pragmatic and discoursal knowledge which entails the use of DMs. I also share the concern of Nattinger and Decarrico (1992) that it is often markers commonly used for transactional/written discourse, such as *but*, *however*, *because*, *firstly*, *secondly* that are emphasized. Hays (1992) also points out that ideational DMs are overtaught compared to other types of markers which are delayed because there is not enough exposure to their use in the discourse community. Moreover, these ideational connectives are often presented or explained in short spans of text without accounting for their use at various hierarchical levels in longer discourse and the

possibility of using them for interactive purposes. DMs peculiar to spoken discourse are generally rarely attended to. Focus has been placed on the propositional content of words; the pragmatic and discoursal aspects of language are infrequently addressed. Such communicatively unrealistic approaches are not very likely to provide appropriate support for students to speak with adequacy.

The above characteristics of foreign language classrooms are unfavorable to the promotion of pragmatic awareness in students' learning process, and may lead to pragmatic fossilization, as discussed earlier. For foreign language learners, the classroom may be the major arena where learners learn and use the language. It is, therefore, vital to reconsider how speaking competence should be addressed in English classrooms in a way that enables learners to become truly communicatively competent. In light of the benefits of DMs for oral communication and the findings of this study, DMs should be established as an integral part of English instruction. The English syllabus should pay due attention to pragmatic and metalinguistic features of language that are highly needed for effective communication.

Pedagogical Suggestions

It can be argued, based on the findings of this study, that adjustments should be made on the overall views on language teaching in the decision-making process about pedagogic issues regarding DMs. A framework that merits our attention is the one proposed by Carter and McCarthy (1995), who notice that discourse has useful implications for the way language is taught. They propose a three-component methodology: illustration, interaction, and induction as a modification of the traditional

presentation, practice and production. “Illustration” means using real data whenever possible as used in context. “Interaction” means engaging learners in discourse-sensitive activities that concentrate on the interpersonal aspect of language and negotiating meanings and properties through observation and class discussion. “Induction” means encouraging learners to make decisions about the interpersonal functions of various linguistic options and to learn to notice such aspects of language. This approach, as McCarthy and Carter conclude, has great potential for the acquisition of more naturalistic communicative skills as it emphasizes the need for authentic language use and encouraging learner’s awareness of language features.

Therefore, as a starting point in promoting communication skill development, it is important to include rich authentic teaching materials to reflect the value of DMs in real spoken interaction. On the one hand, as argued by Cribb (2005) and Papajohn (2005), structured extended discourse should be adequately represented in course materials to show how to transmit information coherently. Learners should be required to produce a sequence of language ‘chunks’ uninterrupted (Cribb, 2005). Since this type of discourse is characterized by the use of ideational markers which can package the discourse in a coherent manner, we need to provide students with opportunities to deliver and practice extended discourse coherently, with an emphasis on explaining the level and the type of relations those lexical devices help accomplish. On the other hand, samples of informal conversations that involve features such as hesitation, stalling, self-repair, turn-taking should also be present for learners to understand how real life spoken interaction proceeds with the help of spoken discourse features including interactional lexical devices as well as ideational markers. In short, to do justice to their importance in

achievement of textual and interactional coherence, DMs should be adequately represented in authentic teaching materials that introduce learners to a variety of situations where spoken interaction takes place.

Besides learning directly from textbooks and teachers, in order to equip students with a sensitivity to the use of discourse in various speaking situations, it is helpful to have students analyze spoken discourse as it is actually produced. Riggenbach (1991) and Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000), among others, suggest introducing discourse analysis to foreign language teaching classrooms. A major benefit is that discourse analytic techniques enable language learners to be conscious of the mechanism operating in natural language comprehension and production, which includes the use of relevant discourse strategies (including DMs). This discovering process may ultimately contribute to the development of the ability to self-monitor their own learning. Another advantage is that such techniques entail rich opportunities for learners to engage in real communication while also focusing on forms at all levels, including the use of DMs (Riggenbach, 1991). Such practices on coherence strategies can have a positive impact on learners' capability in discourse management.

Since the ultimate purpose of conducting discourse analyses is to conduct effective oral communication, it is important to create opportunities for students to interact both in and outside of classrooms. Interaction, according to Allwright (1984), is the "fundamental fact of language pedagogy" (p.156); this is particularly the case with spoken interaction. Only in the course of interaction can learners use DMs meaningfully, and effective learning take place. The classroom has the potential for affording various types of interaction. For example, teaching materials and students' speech can be source

materials for meaningful discussions (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000; Tyler, 1992). Such activities involve learners in a wide range of discourse moves such as initiating and changing topics, organizing materials, backchanelling, hedging and turn taking, which often entail the use of DMs. Also, students can be assigned to use the target language outside the classroom, such as conducting survey interviews with native speakers, or collecting meaningful information outside the classroom, as proposed by Riggenbach (1991). Such contextualized activities can be used to develop learners' capacity to predict needs related to oral communication and conversation management (Burns, 1998). They can give rise to the need for the meaningful use of discourse strategies such as DMs during the course of interaction that can be exploited to serve situational and interactive purposes (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

The central claim here is that DMs should be incorporated into English speaking classes, both in curriculum design and its implementation. To this end, students could be encouraged to identify and analyze critically language features in genuine speech samples and be made aware of their relevance to the course of communication; they could also be helped to foster the ability to reflect on their learning and communicative experiences, because it is of great importance to consider what aspects of language are necessary to the attainment of adequate communicative competence. In more general terms, teaching of spoken language should be turned into an integrative process of creating, maximizing and utilizing learning opportunities to optimize learners' chance of participating effectively in authentic communication situations. It is argued here that only in this way can foreign language classrooms play a more useful role in encouraging students to take

more communicative responsibilities and preparing them to be effective users of the language,

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. A greater number of advanced students would probably produce more statistically significant and generalizable findings. Also, it is important to note that there was possibly an effect of the instrument used for speech elicitation. As a semi-direct interview, the VOCI is task-based and not highly interactive because the interviewers are only present on the screen and what the test-taker says does not receive immediate response from any individual, unlike face-to-face interviews which are characterized by negotiation of meanings and collaboration. We can reasonably presume that there may be some differences in students' speaking performance and DM use between the language elicited by the VOCI and that produced in an informal conversational context. Therefore, it would be interesting to look into the use of DMs in other more natural and interactive contexts and compare students' output elicited by different methods. Another possible drawback is that the inventory of interactional markers was far from exhaustive, which included only a limited number of lexical devices. Availability of a comprehensive model that includes a more complete list of interactional markers would definitely make more illuminating findings possible. Another important and interesting area to investigate is the effect of students' first language on their DM use in the learned language, because it was possible that certain use of DMs in this study was a result of the transfer from students' first language.

Pedagogically speaking, it is necessary to investigate how the English curriculum affects students' use of DMs. It would also be interesting to look into the factors contributing to the different use of DMs by students at different proficiency levels. In addition, more studies need to be carried out to explore how pragmatics such as DMs can be integrated into EFL speaking classes to empower students to be more capable users of the language. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study can furnish researchers and EFL teachers with additional insights into how discourse coherence is a linguistic parameter relevant to EFL classrooms in their effort of providing the support students need to get communicatively competent.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES—SPEAKING *REVISED1999*

SUPERIOR

Superior-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:

- participate fully and effectively in conversations in formal and informal settings on topics related to practical needs and areas of professional and/or scholarly interests
- provide a structured argument to explain and defend opinions and develop effective hypotheses within extended discourse
- discuss topics concretely and abstractly
- deal with a linguistically unfamiliar situation
- maintain a high degree of linguistic accuracy
- satisfy the linguistic demands of professional and/or scholarly life

ADVANCED

Advanced-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:

- participate actively in conversations in most informal and some formal settings on topics of personal and public interest
- narrate and describe in major time frames with good control of aspect
- deal effectively with unanticipated complications through a variety of communicative devices
- sustain communication by using, with suitable accuracy and confidence, connected discourse of paragraph length and substance
- satisfy the demands of work and/or school situations

INTERMEDIATE

Intermediate-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:

- participate in simple, direct conversations on generally predictable topics related to daily activities and personal environment
- create with the language and communicate personal meaning to sympathetic interlocutors by combining language elements in discrete sentences and strings of sentences
- obtain and give information by asking and answering questions
- sustain and bring to a close a number of basic, uncomplicated communicative exchanges, often in a reactive mode
- satisfy simple personal needs and social demands to survive in the target language culture

NOVICE

Novice-level speakers are characterized by the ability to:

- respond to simple questions on the most common features of daily life
- convey minimal meaning to interlocutors experienced with dealing with foreigners by using isolated words, lists of words, memorized phrases and some personalized recombinations of words and phrases
- satisfy a very limited number of immediate needs

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APPENDIX B

TRANSCRIPT OF VOCI TASKS

1. A: This is a picture of my hometown.
   B: Tell us about your hometown.
2. Instead of writing letters, you have decided to send a cassette message to a friend back home. Describe where you are living now and what you've been doing recently.
3. A: I'm so happy my best friend just got back from vacation. I really missed him a lot.
   B: My best friend moved away and she's impossible to replace because she's so special.
   A: Describe one of your friends.
4. Because of a last minute problem you missed a dinner engagement with a friend. You called to apologize, but your friend is not yet home, so you need to leave a message on the answering machine apologizing for the date and explaining why you were not there.
5. A: Did you know that I went to New York last month? It sure is an interesting city.
   B: What's so special about it?
   A: The entire time I was there I tried to compare it with our city. There are lots of differences, but on the other hand, lots of things are similar.
   B: Can you compare your hometown with a city that you visited or you know well?
6. A: One thing that I didn't like about New York was that it is so big. I never really feel comfortable in big cities anymore.
   B: Why not? I love city life. There's nothing more fascinating than a really big city. Not me.
   A: Not me. There are too many problems I guess.
   B: What do you think? What are the advantages or disadvantages of big city life?
7. A: It's really unbelievable.
   B: Yes, that was a really terrific experience.
   A: There are some experiences you just can't forget.
   B: That's true. Have you ever had such an experience—an experience that you'll never forget.
   A: It can be something positive or it can be something negative.
   B: Tell us about it.
8. A: So, you've finally made up your mind?

B: Yes, and I'm really excited about it.
A: Then you must have pretty concrete plans for the next few years?
B: Yes, and I also have a good idea about what my life might be like.
A: And you, what are your plans? What do you need to reach your goals?
B: How might your life look ten years from now?

9. A: I really love this painting.
B: I don't understand it at all.
A: Tell us why you think this is or isn't art.

10. A: My computer is broken again.
B: Man, what a disaster!
A: Yeah, I feel so dependent on these machines.
B: Modern technology can make life easy, but it can cause a lot of frustration too.
A: Discuss the positive benefits and the negative consequences of our dependence on such machines.

11. A: Some undergraduates at American universities think that native speakers of English make the most effective teachers.
B: On the other hand, some people think the advantages of having an international teacher outweigh the disadvantages.
A: What do you think?

12. If you were a teacher and you discovered one of your students had cheated on a test by copying from another student's paper, what would you do?

13. A: Did you know that US law allows trials to be televised?
B: Yes, several high profile trials have been televised recently because of the Freedom of Information Act.
A: I wonder if that's such a good idea.
B: What do you think about televising criminal trails?

14. A: Have you noticed how many shows on TV portray violent crime?
B: It's pretty hard not to notice!
A: Some people feel that this creates violence in our society.
B: Yes, but other people feel that it has no effect on young people. In fact, they're proud of this country's freedom of expression.
A: What do you think about the portrayal of violence and crime on TV?

15. This is the last question. If you've gotten this far, you probably have taken other English tests. If so, how does this test compare to the other English tests you have taken?

APPENDIX C

TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS

Symbols	**Meanings**
#	Uncertain hearing (words) e.g. *#you're #kidding*
~	Pseudograph (fake name, address etc.) e.g. *~Jill*
-	Word truncation/cut-off e.g. *wor-*
--	Intonation unit truncation (Unfinished sentence) e.g. *And some people will --*
.	Completed Intonation Unit e.g. *There are some advantages using computers.*
,	Pause, short e.g. *She's very, very special.*
…	Extended pause e.g. *Let me see … I don't know.*
Capital letter	Sentence start e.g. *My hometown is a beautiful village.*
?	Question e.g. *What do you think?*

APPEDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FORM

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date:	Monday, November 26, 2007
IRB Application No	AS0793
Proposal Title:	An Examination of Chinese Learners' Oral English Proficiency from the Perspective of Discourse
Reviewed and Processed as:	Exempt

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 11/25/2008

Principal Investigator(s

Ming Wei
808 N. Monroe St. Apt. 29
Stillwater, OK 74075

Gene Halleck
205 Morrill
Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

☑ The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,

Sue C Jacobs

Sue C. Jacobs, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Ming Wei

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ORAL PROFICIENCY OF CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: A DISCOURSE MARKER PERSPECTIVE

Major Field: English

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1999-2004: Assistant Professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, China
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2007-2009: Assistant Director of the International Composition Program at Oklahoma State University
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Professional Memberships:

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Name: Ming Wei Date of Degree: May, 2009

Institution: Oklahoma State University Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ORAL PROFICIENCY OF CHINESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH: A DISCOURSE MARKER PERSPECTIVE

Pages in Study: 226 Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: English

Scope and Method of Study: This study investigates the use of discourse markers by Chinese college-level learners of English. It compares the use of discourse markers by students at different proficiency levels. An audio-video instrument called Video Oral Communication Instrument was conducted with fifty students at a Chinese university, among which twenty, including ten intermediate and ten advanced students, were selected for transcription and analysis. Fraser's (1999) taxonomy and Stenström's (1994) inventory were adopted as analytical models for ideational and interactional markers respectively. Then intermediate and advanced students were compared quantitatively and qualitatively with regard to their use of ideational and interactional markers.

Findings and Conclusions: The results showed that advanced students use ideational markers to construct more hierarchical structures, and mark more major discourse divisions to indicate the relevance of particular utterances in the hierarchy of meanings. Advanced students also resort to ideational markers to help fulfill more interactive purposes. They are generally better able to use ideational markers more effectively to construct coherent spoken discourse. Intermediate students are relatively more concerned with text-related issues; their spoken discourse attends more to the transactional aspect of communication. Meanwhile, their effort of transmitting factual information is not necessarily effective in terms of the integration of discourse units since their ideational markers are often used at a more local level and in a sequential manner. With regard to interactional markers, advanced students are more likely than intermediate students to use interactional markers in their spoken discourse; they are relatively more involved in the interactive context.

The discrepancy in ideational and interactional marker use between intermediate and advanced students in this study indicates that proficiency level does relate to the way DMs are used. This study also suggests that contextual variations affect ideational and interactional marker use across proficiency levels. Another important implication is that it is necessary to consider variety and specific use in addition to quantity when examining discourse markers.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Gene B. Halleck